

THE BOY FROM THE WOODS

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ABANDONED "WILD BOY" FOUND IN THE WOODS

Huge Mystery Surrounding Discovery of "Real-Life Mowgli"

WESTVILLE, N.J.—In one of the most bizarre cases in recent history, a wild-haired young boy, estimated to be between six and eight years old, was discovered living on his own in the Ramapo Mountain State Forest near the suburb of Westville. Even more bizarre, authorities have no idea who the boy is or how long he had been there.

"It's like Mowgli in the 'Jungle Book' movie," Westville Police Deputy Oren Carmichael said.

The boy—who speaks and understands English but has no knowledge of his name—was first spotted by Don and Leslie Katz, hikers from Clifton, N.J. "We were cleaning up from our picnic when we heard a rustling in the woods," Mr. Katz said. "At first I worried it was a bear, but then we caught sight of him running, clear as day."

Park rangers, along with local police, found the boy, thin and clad in tattered clothes, in a makeshift campsite three hours later. "At this time, we don't know how long he's been in the state forest or how he got here," said New Jersey State Park Police Chief Tony Aurigemma. "He doesn't recall any parents or adult figures.

We're currently checking with other law enforcement authorities, but so far, there are no missing children who match his age and description."

For the past year, hikers in the Ramapo Mountain area have reported seeing a "feral boy" or "Little Tarzan" matching the boy's description, but most people chalked up the sightings to urban legend.

Said James Mignone, a hiker from Morristown, N.J., "It's like someone just birthed him and left him in the wild."

"It's the strangest survival case any of us have ever seen," Chief Aurigemma said. "We don't know if the boy has been out here days, weeks, months or heck, even years."

If anyone has any information on the young boy, they are asked to contact the Westville Police Department.

"Someone out there has to know something," Deputy Carmichael said. "The boy didn't just appear in the forest by magic."

CHAPTER
ONE

April 23, 2020

How does she survive?
How does she manage to get through this torment
every single day?

Day after day. Week after week. Year after year.

She sits in the school assembly hall, her eyes fixed, unseeing, unblinking. Her face is stone, a mask. She doesn't look left or right. She doesn't move at all.

She just stares straight ahead.

She is surrounded by classmates, including Matthew, but she doesn't look at any of them. She doesn't talk to any of them either, though that doesn't stop them from talking to her. The boys—Ryan, Crash (yes, that's his real name), Trevor, Carter—keep calling her names, harshly whispering awful things, jeering at her, laughing with scorn. They throw things at her. Paper clips. Rubber bands. Flick snot from their noses. They put small pieces of paper in their mouths, wad the paper into wet balls, propel them in various ways at her.

When the paper sticks to her hair, they laugh some more.

The girl—her name is Naomi—doesn't move. She doesn't try to pull the wads of paper out of her hair. She just stares straight

ahead. Her eyes are dry. Matthew could remember a time, two or three years ago, when her eyes would moisten during these ceaseless, unrelenting, daily taunts.

But not anymore.

Matthew watches. He does nothing.

The teachers, numb to this by now, barely notice. One wearily calls out, "Okay, Crash, that's enough," but neither Crash nor any of the others give the warning the slightest heed.

Meanwhile Naomi just takes it.

Matthew should do something to stop the bullying. But he doesn't. Not anymore. He tried once.

It did not end well.

Matthew tries to remember when it all started to go wrong for Naomi. She had been a happy kid in elementary school. Always smiling, that's what he remembered. Yeah, her clothes were hand-me-downs and she didn't wash her hair enough. Some of the girls made mild fun of her for that. But it had been okay until that day she got violently ill and threw up in Mrs. Walsh's class, fourth grade, just projectile vomit ricocheting off the classroom linoleum, the wet brown chips splashing on Kim Rogers and Taylor Russell, the smell so bad, so rancid, that Mrs. Walsh had to clear the classroom, all the kids, Matthew one of them, and send them all out to the kickball field holding their noses and making *pee-uw* sounds.

And after that, nothing had been the same for Naomi.

Matthew always wondered about that. Had she not felt well that morning? Did her father—her mom was already out of the picture by then—make her go to school? If Naomi had just stayed home that day, would it all have gone differently for her? Was her throwing-up her sliding door moment, or was it inevitable that she would end up traveling down this rough, dark, torturous path?

Another spitball sticks in her hair. More name-calling. More cruel jeers.

Naomi sits there and waits for it to end.

End for now, at least. For today maybe. She has to know that it

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won't end for good. Not today. Not tomorrow. The torment never stops for very long. It is her constant companion.

How does she survive?

Some days, like today, Matthew really pays attention and wants to do something.

Most days, he doesn't. The bullying still happens on those days, of course, but it is so frequent, so customary, it becomes background noise. Matthew had learned an awful truth: You grow immune to cruelty. It becomes the norm. You accept it. You move on.

Has Naomi just accepted it too? Has she grown immune to it?

Matthew doesn't know. But she's there, every day, sitting in the last row in class, the first row at assembly, at a corner table all alone in the cafeteria.

Until one day—a week after this assembly—she's not there.

One day, Naomi vanishes.

And Matthew needs to know why.

CHAPTER
TWO

The hipster pundit said, “This guy should be in prison, no questions asked.”

On live television, Hester Crimstein was about to counter-punch when she spotted what looked like her grandson in her peripheral vision. It was hard to see through the studio lights, but it sure as hell looked like Matthew.

“Whoa, strong words,” said the show’s host, a once-cute prepster whose main debate technique was to freeze a baffled expression on his face, as though his guests were idiots no matter how much sense they made. “Any response, Hester?”

Matthew’s appearance—it had to be him—had thrown her.

“Hester?”

Not a good time to let the mind wander, she reminded herself. *Focus.*

“You’re gross,” Hester said.

“Pardon?”

“You heard me.” She aimed her notorious withering gaze at Hipster Pundit. “Gross.”

Why is Matthew here?

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Her grandson had never come to her work unannounced before—not to her office, not to a courtroom, and not to the studio.

“Care to elaborate?” Prepster Host asked.

“Sure,” Hester said. The fiery glare stayed on Hipster Pundit. “You hate America.”

“What?”

“Seriously,” Hester continued, throwing her hands up in the air, “why should we have a court system at all? Who needs it? We have public opinion, don’t we? No trial, no jury, no judge—let the Twitter mob decide.”

Hipster Pundit sat up a little straighter. “That’s not what I said.”

“It’s exactly what you said.”

“There’s evidence, Hester. A very clear video.”

“Ooo, a video.” She wiggled her fingers as though she were talking about a ghost. “So again: No need for a judge or jury. Let’s just have you, as benevolent leader of the Twitter mob—”

“I’m not—”

“Hush, I’m talking. Oh, I’m sorry, I forget your name. I keep calling you Hipster Pundit in my head, so can I just call you Chad?” He opened his mouth, but Hester pushed on. “Great. Tell me, Chad, what’s a fitting punishment for my client, do you think? I mean, since you’re going to pronounce guilt or innocence, why not also do the sentencing for us?”

“My name”—he pushed his hipster glasses up his nose—“is Rick. And we all saw the video. Your client punched a man in the face.”

“Thanks for that analysis. You know what would be helpful, Chad?”

“It’s Rick.”

“Rick, Chad, whatever. What would be helpful, super helpful really, would be if you and your mob just made all the decisions for us. Think of the time we’d save. We just post a video on social media and declare guilt or innocence from the replies. Thumbs-up

or thumbs-down. There'd be no need for witnesses or testimony or evidence. Just Judge Rick Chad here."

Hipster Pundit's face was turning red. "We all saw what your rich client did to that poor man."

Prepster Host stepped in: "Before we continue, let's show the video again for those just tuning in."

Hester was about to protest, but they'd already shown the video countless times, would show it countless more times, and her voicing any opposition would be both ineffective and only make her client, a well-to-do financial consultant named Simon Greene, appear even more guilty.

More important, Hester could use the few seconds with the camera off her to check on Matthew.

The viral video—four million views and counting—had been recorded on a tourist's iPhone in Central Park. On the screen, Hester's client Simon Greene, wearing a perfectly tailored suit with a perfectly Windsored Hermès tie cocked his fist and smashed it into the face of a threadbare, disheveled young man who, Hester knew, was a drug addict named Aaron Corval.

Blood gushed from Corval's nose.

The image was irresistibly Dickensian—Mr. Rich Privileged Guy, completely unprovoked, sucker-punches Poor Street Urchin.

Hester quickly craned her neck toward Matthew and tried, through the haze of the studio spotlights, to meet his eye. She was a frequent legal expert on cable news, and two nights a week, "famed defense attorney" Hester Crimstein had her own segment on this very network called *Crimstein on Crime*, though her name was not pronounced Crime-Rhymes-with-Prime-Stine, but rather Krim-Rhymes-with-Prim-Steen, but the alliteration was still considered "television friendly" and the title looked good on the bottom scroll, so the network ran with it.

Her grandson stood in the shadows. Hester could see that Matthew was wringing his hands, just like his father used to do, and she felt a pang so deep in her chest that for a moment she

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couldn't breathe. She considered quickly crossing the room and asking Matthew why he was here, but the punch video was already over and Hipster Rick Chad was foaming at the mouth.

"See?" Spittle flew out of his mouth and found a home in his beard. "It's clear as day. Your rich client attacked a homeless man for no reason."

"You don't know what went on before that tape rolled."

"It makes no difference."

"Sure it does. That's why we have a system of justice, so that vigilantes like you don't irresponsibly call for mob violence against an innocent man."

"Whoa, no one said anything about mob violence."

"Sure you did. Own it already. You want my client, a father of three with no record, in prison right now. No trial, nothing. Come on, Rick Chad, let your inner fascist out." Hester banged the desk, startling Prepster Host, and began to chant: "Lock him up, lock him up."

"Cut that out!"

"Lock him up!"

The chant was getting to him, his face turning scarlet. "That's not what I meant at all. You're intentionally exaggerating."

"Lock him up!"

"Stop that. No one is saying that."

Hester had something of a gift for mimicry. She often used it in the courtroom to subtly if not immaturely undermine a prosecutor. Doing her best impression of Rick Chad, she repeated his earlier words verbatim: "*This guy should be in prison, no questions asked.*"

"That will be up to a court of law," Hipster Rick Chad said, "but maybe if a man acts like this, if he punches people in the face in broad daylight, he deserves to be canceled and lose his job."

"Why? Because you and Deplorable-Dental-Hygienist and Nail-Da-Ladies-69 on Twitter say so? You don't know the situation. You don't even know if the tape is real."

Prepster Host arched an eyebrow over that one. “Are you saying the video is fake?”

“Could be, sure. Look, I had another client. Someone photo-shopped her smiling face next to a dead giraffe and said she was the hunter who killed it. An ex-husband did that for revenge. Can you imagine the hate and bullying she received?”

The story wasn’t true—Hester had made it up—but it *could* be true, and sometimes that was enough.

“Where is your client Simon Greene right now?” Hipster Rick Chad asked.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“He’s home, right? Out on bail?”

“He’s an innocent man, a fine man, a caring man—”

“And a rich man.”

“Now you want to get rid of our bail system?”

“A rich *white* man.”

“Listen, Rick Chad, I know you’re all ‘woke’ and stuff, what with the cool beard and the hipster beanie—is that a Kangol?—but your use of race and your easy answers are as bad as the other side’s use of race and easy answers.”

“Wow, deflecting using ‘both sides.’”

“No, sonny, that’s not both sides, so listen up. What you don’t see is, you and those you hate? You are quickly becoming one and the same.”

“Reverse this around,” Rick Chad said. “If Simon Greene was poor and black and Aaron Corval was rich and white—”

“They’re both white. Don’t make this about race.”

“It’s always about race, but fine. If the guy in rags hit the rich white man in a suit, he wouldn’t have Hester Crimstein defending him. He’d be in jail right now.”

Hmm, Hester thought. She had to admit Rick Chad had a pretty good point there.

Prepster Host said, “Hester?”

Time was running out in the segment, so Hester threw up her

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hands and said, "If Rick Chad is arguing I'm a great attorney, who am I to disagree?"

That drew laughs.

"And that's all the time we have for now. Coming up next, the latest controversy surrounding upstart presidential candidate Rusty Eggers. Is Rusty pragmatic or cruel? Is he really the most dangerous man in America? Stay with us."

Hester pulled out the earpiece and unclipped the microphone. They were already headed to commercial break when she rose and crossed the room toward Matthew. He was so tall now, again like his father, and another pang struck hard.

Hester said, "Your mother . . . ?"

"She's fine," Matthew said. "Everyone is okay."

Hester couldn't help it. She threw her arms around the probably embarrassed teen, wrapping him in a bear hug, though she was barely five two and he had almost a foot on her. More and more she saw the echoes of the father in the son. Matthew hadn't looked much like David when he was little, when his father was still alive, but now he did—the posture, the walk, the hand wringing, the crinkle of the forehead—and it all broke her heart anew. It shouldn't, of course. It should, in fact, offer some measure of comfort for Hester, seeing her dead son's echo in his boy, like some small part of David survived the crash and still lives on. But instead, these ghostly glimmers rip at her, tear the wounds wide open, even after all these years, and Hester wondered whether the pain was worth it, whether it was better to feel this pain than feel nothing. The question was a rhetorical one, of course. She had no choice and would want it no other way—feeling nothing or someday being "over it" would be the worst betrayal of all.

So she held her grandson and squeezed her eyes shut. The teen patted her back, almost as though he were humoring her.

"Nana?"

That was what he called her. Nana. "You're really okay?"

"I'm fine."

HARLAN COBEN

Matthew's skin was browner than his father's. His mother, Laila, was black, which made Matthew black too or a person of color or biracial or whatever. Age was no excuse, but Hester, who was in her seventies but told everyone she stopped counting at sixty-nine—go ahead, make a joke, she'd heard them all—found it hard to keep track of the evolving terminology.

"Where's your mother?" Hester asked.

"At work, I guess."

"What's the matter?" Hester asked.

"There's this girl in school," Matthew said.

"What about her?"

"She's missing, Nana. I want you to help."