



SNAPSHOT

BY SCOTT A. JOHNSON

In Bernard's hands, a camera was powerful. More so than any gun, any sword, any painter's brush, his camera captured the world for what it was. Painters, though talented, were not true artists to him so much as they were professional liars, able to cover imperfections, omit telling details, add sweetness and color to a cheek where none sat. True, they could create an image that might seem to leap off the page, but those images weren't *truth*. They were still just the artist's interpretation of what they saw, no matter how skilled or detailed the painter's hand. But in his hands, oh in his hands, a camera brought forth life, captured every minute detail, recorded every glint of light, every blister, every darkened wrinkle for all the world to see. A camera never lied, never sheltered, never pandered. It only saw and recorded the truth, no matter how beautiful or ugly it might be.

In the park, his favorite place to sit, Bernard set up his tripod and felt in his bag for his camera, his most prized possession. Let the others keep their high-tech, high-speed digital marvels of the modern age. Digital was not for him. The images were too easy corruptible, too easily edited. For him, the images had to be captured in a special way. For his art, only a single camera would do.

The flat box he pulled from his bag was an anachronism, pulled from a museum or maybe found in some long-forgotten corner of an attic. It was luck that he found it in the old curio shop, but it was almost as if the thing called to him, drew him to the glass cabinet and pulled his eyes to the corner where it sat open and covered in dust. The last time a camera of its kind was sold new, FDR was president and gasoline was considered expensive at eighteen cents a gallon. Still, when he asked to see it, the old man behind the counter smiled and brought it out. It was still in working order, he said, and he would gladly sell it to Bernard for a token price. It took him the space of two breaths to make up his mind, and moments later he carried his prize home and began searching for film. As it turned out, Kodak still made film for their Vest Pocket series camera, though requests for it were few and far between, and it only came in black and white. Fine, he decided. Truth was determined in black and white and shades of gray. Color distracted from the truth anyway.

Delighted, Bernard set to work cleaning and oiling hinges, adjusted springs, and loved the camera back to life. Then he waited with all the patience of a narcotic-addicted

squirrel for his film to arrive. When it did, he wasted no time and loaded his camera and went out in search of faces to capture, truths to be revealed by his art.

His first subject was a young woman and a man, he assumed her lover, who sat on a bench beneath a tree in the park. Through his eyes she was beautiful, he was handsome, and they were in love. But when he arrived home and rushed to his darkroom, the image in the photograph revealed more than he could have expected. The man was truly in love with her, that much anyone could see. But the woman. In the stark black and white and shades of gray, the truth showed in the lines on her face, the cut of her clothes, the far-away expression in her eyes. She did not look at him, but rather watched another man passing by. The bleached-white band on her finger showed where a ring should have been, and the cut of her skirt was just a bit too high. In the photograph, it became clear to Bernard that she didn't love the man. Her hair, light gray in the image darkened near her scalp. It wasn't real. What he took for beauty at first glance revealed itself in the photograph to be shallow, a mask of loveliness beneath which lurked an ugly person. Fascinated, he tacked the photo to the wall and went in search of other hidden truths he could expose with his camera.

For weeks he haunted the park, snapping photos with his ancient eye, capturing children, animals, adults. Any who crossed in front of him found themselves unwitting subjects of his need to reveal the truth. Puppies that seemed cute and friendly came clear with muddy paws and disease-ridden mouths. Children that looked playful and happy betrayed greed as they wolfed down ice-cream, and self-centered abandon as they soiled their clothing and smiled at children less fortunate than they. A photo of a homeless man, dirty and avoided by anyone else, revealed kind eyes and a genuine smile, despite his situation. So much ugliness, so much beauty, so much hidden, he felt a perverse joy at his discovery.

On a Sunday, he took his camera to the park as usual, eager to capture more truths and to unmask the world. He thought about a display, a showing at a gallery, where he could unveil his vision and confront the world with its own pretensions. No filters, no airbrushes, no digital pen to slim the fat or erase the blemishes. Just truth in black and white.

As he walked down the path, he paused at random intervals, snapping photos of people whom he thought looked interesting, wondering what secrets his lens would reveal about them in his darkroom. Boulders here, trees there, the occasional animal, but mostly he photographed people, took them unawares as they went about their business. What would they be, he wondered, when he managed to get a good, close look at them frozen in time.

When he arrived home that evening, he felt satisfied. His cartridge was full, and the smell of developer and fixer beckoned him from his darkroom in the basement. It took him nearly an hour in total darkness to apply the chemicals to the film properly, a process he'd practiced and perfected over many nights and several canisters ruined. When he at last turned on the amber work-lights, he felt as if the day's shoot would reveal more to him than any other. He loaded the film into the enlarger and set to work pulling the images onto paper. The first few were nothing special, images of people who wore their disguised selves like a sheer pelts, opaque in the sun but transparent to his camera's lens. In one a mother looked at her child with despair in her eyes and a false smile on her lips. In another, a man spoke to a young lady while his eyes followed another woman down the path. One after another showed lie after lie until he was certain that there wasn't an honest person left in the city.

But the last photo in the spool caught his attention. The subject matter was not very different than the others, but there was something odd about the image. Beside the young man, in the periphery, stood a tree. In truth, there were trees all around him, but one in particular caught Bernard's attention. It wasn't the focus of the picture, but it was clear enough in focus that he noticed something strange about it. He adjusted his enlarger to its highest setting and focused it on a small section of the bark. There was something there, he was sure of it.

He slid another sheet of photo-paper into the holder and pressed the button to expose the image, then held his breath as he submerged the sheet into developer. As the image grew more clear, he stared. The whole page was filled with the rough lines and texture of bark except in one small area where there appeared what seemed to be fingers. A hand, even, reached around the trunk, its clawed fingers dug into the bark. He slid the photo into a tray of fixer then hung it to dry, then clicked on the main lights.

It could have been a blemish on the tree, perhaps a tear in the negative, but damned if it didn't look like a small clawed hand reaching around the base of the tree.

He snatched the other photos from where they hung and took them to his living room where the light would allow him to see more. Once there, he took a magnifying glass from his desk drawer and sat down to re-examine each print. There, in each, were tiny signs, imperceptible details of whatever the little things were, and he'd never noticed them before. In several, what he mistook for a leaf might very well have been a tail or an ear, in others small dots of light might have been eyes reflecting the sun. But the last photograph stole his breath away for the second time that day. Now that he'd seen them, whatever they were, they were obvious. Tiny black-taloned hands reached around the back of the bench, glistening eyes peered from between the slats, reached into the boy's knapsack, touched his shoes, and he never noticed.

Bernard went back to his darkroom with his negatives and stayed up the whole night re-developing images, refocusing on the backgrounds, and marveled as he saw signs of strange creatures that passed among the normal people unnoticed.

The next day, he gathered the best of his prints and took them to a gallery. The owner huffed his skepticism over the legitimacy of the photos, but as Bernard explained how he'd gotten the shots, his brow creased with interest. At the end of the day, he agreed to have a showing in his gallery. But there would need to be more photographs, more images of the strange creatures that existed in the periphery to fill the walls. Bernard assured him that there would be no problem, and set off toward the park, his camera loaded and ready, to capture the true nature of the world.

The sun beat a warm glare against the treetops as Bernard made his way to his favorite spot, where he'd first captured the unknown little beasts. He decided to forego shooting at the passers-by and target the areas where he knew the creatures lay. Trees, bushes, beneath benches and around lampposts, wherever there was an ignored patch of darkness, wherever people normally didn't look, that's where he trained his lens. When he'd captured more than a dozen images, he put his camera away and hurried home, eager to see what new animals his safari'd yielded.

But in his darkroom, he saw none of them. No glancing eyes from beneath the benches, no tiny clawed hands reaching around trees. As each image came into view, his

heart sank by degrees. Were they gone? Had he lost the knack? Maybe they were never really there to begin with. Maybe he'd imagined them all, and managed to convince the gallery owner to follow him in his lunacy. As the last photo came into focus, he felt his breath hitch. The image was a mistake, a shot taken as he pulled the camera off the tripod in haste. Distinct in the photo were his own shoes on the grass. And between them stood one of the creatures, no longer hidden behind a tree or glimpsed in shadow, staring up into the lens with raw surprise in its eyes. It looked for the life of him like a small dog, except that it stood on two legs and its front paws were clawed hands. Great ears like the wings of a bat protruded from the sides of its head, each tufted with coarse black hair. Its black eyes shone against the sunlight, and its snubbed nose dripped with what he took to be drool. The creature's mouth hung open, revealing rows of wickedly pointed teeth. It at once repelled and fascinated him.

And then the thought hit him: The creature was standing between his feet, so close it could have taken a bite out of his leg with its saw-like teeth. And he never saw it, nor would he have, had it not been for an accident. Were they around people all the time? Were they to blame for missing pens and spilled drinks? Perhaps they were malevolent, little pranksters playing practical jokes on the world, or worse.

He returned to the park the next day, determined to capture more of them, but this time he knew the trick. Never head-on, never on purpose, the only way to see them was at the edges, to take them unawares. Otherwise, they'd hide again and his photographs would be of a false world.

He stayed until the sun dipped below the horizon and the light was too shallow for his camera. Throughout the day, he shot image after image of this and that, him and her, she and he, sitting, standing, walking, talking, but without much interest. It didn't matter though, so long as the little beasts didn't think he was looking for them. As he carefully placed his camera back into his satchel, his stomach fluttered with hopeful anticipation. He'd been so careful during the day, aside from a few nervous glances.

When he returned to his house, he headed to the darkroom straightaway, without any thought of food or sleep. He had to see them. He had to know if he'd been successful.

An hour in total pitch gave him time to think about the images from before, in which hidden creatures stalked mankind unseen. One image in particular, in which the creature stood in naked glory between his feet, chilled him as he imagined it standing with him, alone in the dark, and he unaware of its presence. By the time he was done, he had a first-rate case of the chills started, but could not make himself stop. The gallery aside, he just had to see. He had to know.

One by one, with painstaking care, he enlarged the images to normal sizes, then took them into the light where, with a magnifying glass, he sought out traces of the little beasts.

The first few images revealed nothing. Women, children, dogs, businessmen, normal lies from average liars. By the time he developed his fifth photograph, his mood was sour. Maybe he'd spoiled it by catching them before. Maybe the one he caught between his feet told the others to hide from him. Maybe he'd seen the last of them for the rest of his life.

When the sixth photo came from out of the fixer, he gave it a half-hearted glance. Two women, each regarding the other with patient disdain, sat on a bench. No doubt, they were "best friends," but in their eyes he saw jealousy and hatred for one another. But there, just behind the thinner of the two, there was a dark spot, so small, but it made his heart hammer. He took the stairs two at a time until he reached the light of his living room and snatched the magnifying glass from the table.

It was one of them, he was sure of it. The dark blob had shape and form, ones he recognized. He scanned the rest of the photo, but found no other sign of the creatures. But it didn't matter. He'd caught one. Even one was worth the hours spent. He headed back down to his darkroom to enlarge the image.

When the antique clock in his living room chimed, Bernard looked up from his enlarger with a start. Two chimes. Could it really be that late? Not that it mattered. His photographs absorbed him. Since the sixth, every image contained something wondrous. The seventh held three of the beasts, the eighth captured four. By the time he developed his twentieth image, it was easy for him to pick them out. A shadow here, a blur there, why, the park grounds teemed with them. It wasn't until his last image sat in his enlarger that he noticed something odd. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but it appeared...

He exposed the paper and took it to the developer tray. As the image gained focus, he felt his mouth go dry. In the dim amber light, he couldn't be certain, but it seemed...

He thrust the picture into the fixer, shook it dry, then raced up the stairs to the bright lights of his living room. There, he didn't need his magnifier to see them. The hairs on his arms prickled at the image he held.

There were so many. Dozens of them crowded the photo, surrounded the pudgy boy on his tricycle. But they weren't playing pranks or pulling at his wheels. All of the creatures stood rock still. They stared into the lens of the camera. They knew his purpose was to capture them on film, and to that end, they'd given him one amazing shot. But the sight of it chilled his bones. They were staring at him, all of them with deep-set eyes and drooling mouths.

If his experience in photography had taught Bernard anything, it was how to read body language to reveal the truth. Now he wished he didn't know so much. Each of them held their arms away from their bodies a bit, flexed their clawed fingers wide. Their heads were slightly down and their butterfly-like ears laid back against their scalps. There was anger in their postures, but more than that. Every eye held a vicious gleam, every tooth a cruel curve. Their claws looked sharp enough to rend steel, and their hands fairly twitched to prove it. They knew he'd seen them.

He didn't sleep that night. Not for lack of trying, but every time he closed his eyes, hundreds of angry little faces stared back at him. Every creek or scuttle brought him up from his bed with terror in his heart. By the time the sun peeked over the horizon, he was exhausted. But with his fatigue came a sense of accomplishment. The gallery owner would love the new photos, he was sure of it.

A shower and breakfast later, Bernard still felt tired, but satisfied. He strolled down the street toward the gallery, certain that the pictures in his valise, particularly the one which he referred to as the "group photo," would make a fine focal point to his show. But as he showed the images to the gallery owner, he was met with ambivalence. Sure, there were pictures of monsters in the park, but only in the park. Weren't there other places that the little beasts lived? The group photo was interesting, but it looked staged.

Couldn't Bernard find these creatures in some other setting? From the way they looked, it seemed they were around people all the time.

The thought hadn't occurred to Bernard before. The park couldn't be the only place they lived, could it? Things happened to people every day that were the obvious influence of the...whatever they were. Surely these creatures must live in other places, like churches and office buildings. And homes.

Were they in his home? And how many of them could there be? And did they know that he'd seen them? How could they not? Surely they'd seen the photos themselves. Perhaps the scuttling noises he heard at night weren't raccoons or rats in the attic. Maybe, when he stood in the pitch of his darkroom, he was never really alone. Perhaps, in the inky blackness, there were tiny eyes and hungry mouths waiting to commit evil upon him.

He opened the door to his house with caution. The living room looked the same, still smelled of dust and fixer. But he could not shake the feeling of being watched. Ridiculous paranoia or not, every step he took past his threshold gave him the sensation of a hundred eyes crawling across his flesh. They were here, he was sure of it.

His camera sat on the table where he'd left it, untouched. Maybe the creatures were here, and maybe they weren't. But he needed to find out. He loaded a new film magazine and went from room to room, snapping photos in each at random intervals. A photo of the toilet, one of the stove. He shuddered when he snapped a picture of his bed, dreading what the image might show him. As he made his way down the hall, the feeling of being followed was overwhelming, so much so that he spun once or twice and snapped a picture of the empty hallway behind him. When he finished, he opened the door to the basement, his work area, and made his way down.

When he flipped the light switch, the whole space seemed to shrink away. For almost six years, the only lights allowed were the dim amber bulbs of his darkroom. With the main overhead white lights on, he was amazed at how many nooks and crannies he didn't remember. He was also amazed to realize just how small the space really was.

He snapped a few photos, then made his way back up the stairs to his living room. He put his camera down on the coffee table and stared at it. For the first time, he looked at the flat box as something other than an extension of himself, more than a tool for

exposing the truth. Though it sat quietly, he regarded it as though it radiated menace. Photos of others, exposing the truth of their lives and falsehood, he could handle. But he'd never taken photos of his own living space, never turned the all-seeing eye of the lens on himself. In the past, he'd told himself that he just wasn't that interesting, but the truth was he wasn't sure he wanted to know what his lens would reveal. Now, more than ever, with the prospect of strange creatures in his house, he was certain he didn't want to know. But he had to. The thought gnawed at him as he stared at the damned piece of machinery. If they were here, he wanted to know.

He snatched the camera up and made his way back downstairs to his darkroom. As he turned out the lights, his heart fluttered. If they were here, he'd be alone with them. In the dark. Would they let him develop the photos? How would they react at being discovered? True, the ones in the park knew he'd seen them, but here, in his own house, where he couldn't just walk away, would there be consequences?

He set his mind to the task at hand, removed the cartridge from the camera, and set to work developing the film. It was difficult to manage the task, though he'd done it a hundred times before. But his hands shook, and every stray sound echoed in the tiny space, now grown cavernous by the darkness. By the time he was done, he almost couldn't bear to put the film on paper. But his need to know grew, changed into morbid curiosity, not just about the creatures, but about the photos themselves.

With each image he developed, more than a dozen total, his curiosity grew, so much so that he did not follow his usual custom of looking at each image as it developed. He developed them all, hung them to dry, and stood watching droplets of fixer and water slide off the glossy paper. When he could no longer resist, he pulled them down and hurried up the stairs to the light of his living room. Once there, he spread the photos out on his coffee table and stared.

There was his home, his life, his personality in honest black and white. From the creases on his bed that revealed his poor social life to the spotless kitchen that showed him to be obsessive, he was there. A single note hung from the refrigerator, which made the thing look lonely and pathetic in the camera's eye. The image of the living room was, at first glance, tidy. Further inspection, however, revealed dust on the shelves and scuffs

on the couch. The room was more-or-less unused, another testament to his lonely lifestyle.

When his eyes rested on the photo of the hall, the one taken behind him, he felt his stomach drop. Where he'd only seen carpet and bare walls before, there were eyes, teeth, claws and ears, tufts of hair and angry expressions. He counted more than twenty before he gave up and sat back on the couch. They were here.

He glanced back across the mosaic on his coffee table. In every photo, they were there. Little blobs, tiny shadows, glints that another person might take for light coming through the window, every picture had them. They were here.

The photos of his dark room startled him to tears. In the room where he developed the film, the room of pitch midnight black, they crawled on the walls and stood on shelves, balanced on the drying line and sat on his canisters. He was so afraid of being alone in the dark with them, and they were there all along. In the other section, where he enlarged and developed the prints, they clung to his enlarger and peeked from under the shelves.

His eyes came to rest on the photos of his bathroom. The creatures peered from behind the shower curtain and hugged his shampoo bottle. One lounged against his razor while another appeared to be scratching its backside on his toothbrush. As he counted, he noticed something in the photo that terrified him beyond reason. In the bathroom mirror, he'd managed to catch his own reflection, camera held in front of his face like a strange cycloptic monster. And in his reflection, he could also see them. They perched on each shoulder, climbed from around his back. On his head sat one that he was sure was the same beast he'd captured between his feet only days before.

They were here. They'd always been here, he figured. Always darting between his feet as he walked, always staying just out of sight, always watching. How many times, he wondered were misplaced keys their doing, or broken glasses, or missed telephone calls? How many times had his chemicals gone bad or his light-safe leaked? Were they to blame? Did they eat breakfast with him? Watch him in the shower? Touch him while he slept? The thought made his skin crawl, but more, it intrigued him.

So long he'd sought out the truth in the world, to capture the raw essence of what was real beneath the fantasy of perception, and now he had it. Proof that what people thought was the real world was only a thin veil.

He sat back on his couch and looked around the room. They were watching him. Every glittering eye burned into his skin like a cigarette. But they never came out where he could see them.

"I know you're here," he said.

At the sound of his voice, the room twittered. Chatters and growls came from every corner.

"I know you're here," he said again, louder this time. "And I'm showing the world what you are!"

The growls grew louder and more chattering voices joined them. They sounded just as he thought they would, like rats or tiny dogs. The voices came from everywhere. Down the hallway, behind the sofa on which he sat, above in the light fixture. They heard him. More unsettling was the notion that they'd understood, and they were angry.

He snatched his camera from the table and ran to the basement door. He knew they were down there, but so was his film. He needed another magazine. He needed more photos for the gallery. If that pompous ass of an owner wanted dramatic, he'd show him dramatic. The creatures were too small to do any real damage, and when it was all over with, he'd take the money he was sure to get from the gallery and move to another home. A quiet home in the countryside, where nasty little beasts didn't live.

At the base of the stairs he paused and listened. The growls and chatters came from up above, but the darkness of the basement was quiet. He hurried to the cabinet where he kept his extra film stock, tore off the wrapper, and loaded his camera. When he turned back toward the stairs, he froze.

So many eyes, so many rows of hungry teeth, so many angry little monsters stared at him with hatred in their eyes. No longer content to hide in the periphery, they stood before him, bold as brass. On the walls and ceiling were more, all staring, all silent. He was trapped and he knew it.

Bernard saw the sea of angry creatures surge and did the only thing he could think to do. He began snapping pictures.

Lights around the entrance of the Concept Art Gallery burned bright against twilight as silk shoes and faux-fox wraps strolled up the red carpet. The new exhibit was a smashing success, and Gary Mitchell reveled in the success of his gallery. He knew he had something special in the new photography exhibit from the first moment that odd little man appeared with his photos in tow. But until a week ago, he wasn't sure the showing would be a success. Until the man's mangled body was found in his basement darkroom. It took a large amount of money to convince the judge that the final images in Bernard's camera were his rightful property, but in the end, they were worth the expense. Dead artists, after all, made more money than live ones.

The procession of more than three-hundred people passed from one carefully matted print to the next, each one eliciting more gasps and nervous conversation than the last. A few of the attendees shrieked when they saw themselves in the portraits, unwitting participants in the artist's vision. Still more scoffed at the odd little creatures, calling them obvious hoaxes or careful bits of fakery.

The procession made their way through the six main galleries until they came to the last door. The seventh was left bare, with no frames or images on the white walls. In the center of the room, hanging from wires, were the final three photos taken from Bernard's camera. In the first, the sea of little beasts were visible, a few in the front moving so fast that they appeared to be blurs in the grainy black and white print. In the second, the room beyond them was obscured by all their course little bodies, their glittering eyes, wicked claws and razor-like teeth. The last image, one that haunted even Gary to the point that he didn't like to look at it, showed only one of the little monsters, his mouth covering most of the lens, his eyes visible, and in the reflection of his black eye, the photographer screamed.