

Punxsutawney E.T.
by Lesley L. Smith

Kyle was waiting for me in the nurse's office when I got to school. As we walked out I asked, "Chicken pox? Really?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. That's what the nurse said."

Looking him over, I couldn't see any red eruptions. "Show me."

He lifted up his shirt and exposed several small red bumps on his stomach.

"It itches." He scratched at it half-heartedly.

"Don't scratch them, honey."

"I know, Mom," he said in his my-mom's-an-idiot voice.

I said, "Didn't you have it a few years ago when your brothers had it?" as we got in the car.

Kyle shook his head, brushing his too-long dark hair out of his eyes. "I think that was before I was born, Mom."

We pulled out of the parking space, and I glanced at him as we stopped at the school's street entrance. He did look little and vulnerable. "How do you feel?"

"I feel fine, except for the itchiness."

I leaned over the front seat and felt his forehead. "You don't feel hot."

He squirmed away from me. "I'm not hot. I feel fine. I told the nurse. But she said there was some stupid rule about contag-something, so I had to go home."

"Contagious." I sighed. Wouldn't you know it, a sick kid today, on my busiest day of the year. The whole town's busiest day of the year, for that matter; hence my baby-sitter deficit.

"It's a total rip. We were going to get out of class this afternoon to go over to see the crowning of the Groundhog King and Queen."

I started driving in the direction of Gobbler's Knob, the one thing I couldn't check via a telephone call. "Well, you did get out of school."

He smiled briefly. "Hey, are we still going on the hayride later?"

I shook my head. "Doubtful."

"What about the chili and hot-wing cook-off tonight?" he asked.

"It doesn't look promising." My stomach roiled at the memory of Kyle's chili-covered hot-wings last year. Avoiding that tradition might be a plus.

"The sleep-over at the Community Center?"

Just what we needed, the whole town exposed to chicken pox. "Nope, sorry, Kyle."

"The pox sucks!" He kicked the back of the seat.

"Please don't kick the seat, Kyle," I said. "And zip up your coat."

"It's not cold out." Kyle glanced out the window. "Hey, where are we going? This isn't the way home."

"I have to check on Phil. You know I'm basically in charge of everything this year."

"Can I come see Phil?" Kyle asked hopefully.

"It would be better if you rested in the car," I said.

"Isn't your boss the one in charge? I thought you were just a secretary," he said.

"Just? Who said that?"

"Chase."

It figured. Almost-teenagers were just as bad as teenagers were supposed to be. "I'm an executive assistant. And for your information, assistants are the ones that do all the work."

"Whatever."

The security guard, George, waved me down at the gates. "Sorry, ma'am. The gates don't open to the public until 3:00 a.m."

I rolled my window down. "I'm not the public, George."

He smiled nervously. "Oh, so you're not, Ms. Mallow. Did the big guy send you out to check on Phil?"

"Yep."

"Go on ahead then." He opened the gates and waved at Kyle as we drove through.

Kyle didn't wave back.

I parked at the edge of the parking lot. "Now, I want you to keep your coat zipped up and rest in the back seat for a few moments while I run over to check on Phil."

"Can't I come to see Phil? Please?"

Looking down at his earnest face, I was having trouble resisting him. He wouldn't be that much warmer staying in the car, anyway.

"I'm going miss all that other neat stuff. I should get to do something for Groundhog's Day."

"Oh, all right. Come on. But keep your coat zipped. And stay with me, don't run off."

"Jeez. I'm not a dog, Mom," he said in disgust.

That was the second appearance of his my-mom's-an-idiot voice in one trip. I smiled. He must not feel too sick.

We cautiously approached the mound of brush and dead logs. There was no sign of Phil. We walked closer. Still no sign. Now what? How was I going to assure my boss Phil was alive and well when I had no idea?

"Where is he?" Kyle asked.

"In his house, I guess." I pointed at an opening in the debris.

Kyle crept up closer.

"Be careful. Don't get too close, Kyle."

Before I could react, Kyle had grabbed up a long stick and was poking it into the hole.

"Kyle! Stop it! Phil's a wild animal. Don't provoke him." I rushed up to Kyle to take away the stick.

As I reached for it, however, we heard, "Stop that!" coming from inside the burrow.

What the hell?

Kyle resumed poking with enthusiasm.

"I said, stop that!" A small furry, whiskered figure appeared in the entrance of the burrow. "How would you like it if I came to your house and poked you?"

Kyle dropped his stick. "Co-ol!"

I surreptitiously pinched myself. It hurt. "Kyle I want you to back away from that thing." Was I sick, too? Could I be delirious with fever? I felt my forehead. It felt normal.

"Hi, my name's Kyle. Are you Phil? How come you can talk? I didn't know groundhog's could talk."

"Come on, Kyle." I grabbed his jacket and pulled him backwards.

The creature stepped out of its burrow. It was about a foot and a half tall, covered with brown fur, with expressive brown eyes and gray whiskers. It was also wearing some kind of belt with tools and a kind of purse over its shoulder. Yep. I must be delirious. We were going straight to the hospital from here.

Kyle shrugged out of my grasp and took a step toward the creature. "Let go, Mom."

"Nice to meet you, Kyle. Yes, you can call me Phil. You couldn't pronounce my real name. I'm not from around here."

"Awesome!" Kyle yelled. "Are you from another planet, like E.T.?"

This wasn't happening.

"You are a smart young man. Yes, I am from another planet."

"Where's your space ship? Can I ride in it?"

Over-my-dead-body it'd give Kyle a ride.

"Unfortunately, I cannot give you a ride right now," Phil said. "My colleagues have it hidden on the other side of your moon."

"Cool!" Kyle said. "What are you doing here?"

The creature made a sound that might be construed to be a laugh. "I'm studying human beings. This is the only place and time I can do so from close up--obviously." He indicated his groundhog-like physique.

"So, how do you predict the weather?" Kyle asked.

"He doesn't predict the weather, Kyle," I said. "Or at least regular groundhogs don't predict the weather. We just check if they see their shadows when stick their head out of their burrows." I didn't know what this thing did.

"Actually, in anticipation of this event, I do have access to some fairly sophisticated weather software." Phil reached into his purse and pulled out some sheets of paper. "This is based on a high-resolution fully-coupled global climate model and it looks like winter will continue for some time."

"Cool!" Kyle said. "So tomorrow morning you will see your shadow?"

Phil, or whatever the creature was, nodded. "Right you are, young man."

I didn't know what kind of delusion Kyle and I were sharing, but I'd had my fill of it. "Time to go, Kyle. You have to get to bed."

"Aw, Mom. Can't I stay and talk to Phil?"

"No. And that's final." I used my obey-me-or-no-video-games voice.

Kyle meekly agreed.

The creature waved at us as we turned away. "Nice meeting you, Kyle and Kyle's Mom."

When my husband Jack came home from work at dinnertime he found Kyle and I in bed. "Katie, Honey? What's wrong? Why are you in bed?"

I told him about the pox and our visit to Gobbler's Knob.

"I don't get it. Was it a groundhog or wasn't it?" he said.

"I have no idea."

He just looked at me for a few moments. "I knew you were working too hard."

Finally an explanation that made sense! I had been working too hard lining up magicians, face-painters, balloon artists, scavenger hunts, banquets, dances, special movie showings, and all the rest.

Jack continued, "I'll make you and Kyle some soup before Tyler and Chase and I go to the cook-off and sleep-over." He paused. "Unless you want us to stay home?"

I grinned at his hopeful tone. "Nice try. We promised the boys they could go and it looks like you're stuck taking them."

Kyle woke me up entirely too early the next day. "Happy Groundhog Day, Mom!" he said, bouncing on the bed.

"Happy Groundhog Day, Kyle. What time is it?" I asked.

"It's almost 7:00 and I want to go to the Groundhog Pancake Breakfast!"

"I'm sorry, Honey. You can't go. You're still contagious. How do you feel? Do you need more calamine lotion?"

"It's so not fair! I already missed the trek and everything!" It was his sad little frown that was contagious.

Poor kid. It was unfair. "How about we have our own Groundhog Pancake Breakfast? I'll call Dad and get Tyler and Chase to come home and join us."

"Will you make groundhog-shaped pancakes?" Kyle's cheeks were flushed under his sleep-tousled hair.

"Uh..." I reached for my robe.

"Or spaceship-shaped pancakes? Or moon-shaped pancakes? I want moon-shaped pancakes!"

I smiled. "Moon-shaped pancakes coming up."

When Jack and the boys rolled in a little later, they looked wiped out. Tyler and Chase dragged their backpacks behind them and their hair was sticking out even more than Kyle's had been.

Jack poured himself some coffee. "I don't know why they call it a sleep-over."

"Happy Groundhog Day!" Kyle said.

"Happy Groundhog Day, Kyle," Jack said.

"Did you go to the Knob?" Kyle asked. "Did you see Phil? What did he say?"

Chase snorted as he sat down. "Say? Don't be a retard, Kyle. Groundhogs don't talk."

"Chase," Jack said. "We don't use the work 'retard'."

"They do talk!" Kyle said. "Phil told us yesterday winter would keep going."

Tyler sat down with some juice. "He came out and saw his shadow, but we saw some awesome fireworks first. Dad says that means winter stays."

I spared Jack a glance as I ladled out batter. "Did you see anything unusual?" I didn't know if I wanted them to or not.

Jack shrugged. "Nope."

After breakfast, Jack, Tyler, and Chase went to bed and Kyle started begging me to go to Gobbler's Knob. "We have to check on Phil. What if I gave him the pox, Mom? What if he's sick and that's why he didn't talk? Or, what if I killed him?"

"Chicken pox isn't that dangerous, Honey," I said.

"How do you know? Phil isn't like us, is he?"

Whatever that creature was, it definitely wasn't like us. And I had to admit I really wanted to get to the bottom of what we'd seen. "If you dress really warm, I guess we could go over there."

"Yes!" Kyle ran to his room to get dressed.

When we got out to Gobbler's Knob, there were no people, but there was trash everywhere: discarded coffee cups, napkins, you-name-it.

Kyle made a face. "Ick." He went right up to the burrow. "Phil? Phil, it's Kyle. Happy Groundhog Day!" He paused, waiting. "Come on out, Phil. It's your buddy Kyle"

Nothing happened. No creature appeared.

Before I knew what was happening, Kyle crawled into the burrow.

"Kyle!" I ran after him. "Get out of there! It's dangerous."

Kyle backed out. "He's gone, Mom. This is all that's left." He held out a scrap of paper.

I took it. It said only 'fully-coupled global climate model'. Someone from the crowd this morning must have dropped it.

Right?