

room. Rei stood up and walked towards the balcony. The roof was only a few feet away. She could make the jump. She had to make the jump.

The night breeze gently blew against her face as Rei passed through the balcony doors. She climbed over the railing, holding on tightly.

The door slowly opened as Chez knocked quietly. “Ma’am?” He looked over to where she stood.

Rei looked back and smiled. Then she flew.

EMILY PAPE

The Giggle

“Well, that looks pointless.” It was a cold voice, sharp while smiling.

Ella stopped mid-shovel and let out a seething breath. She stood up and turned to face the repulsive old man from down the road, assuming an unconvincing neutral façade. He had stopped on the edge of the recently cleared pavement. The snow was falling so fast that it was hard to see anything far beyond her driveway, so there was nothing to distract her from the thin lips stretched taut over teeth yellowed with age, or the cool black eyes glittering underneath his ragged mad bomber hat. She wasn’t sure what color it had been originally, but it was a dingy shade of gray now. His coat was just as worn, like he had bought it fifty years ago and never taken it off.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Peterson,” Ella said, her voice stiff. “How are you today?”

“Quite well, my dear.” His smile widened into a manic, unsettling thing, paired with a gaze that bore with unparalleled focus. It wasn’t what he said. It was how he said it—sly niceties delivered with a toneless edge. Ella thought it was odd, how clear his voice was; older men were supposed to have rough, aged voices.

Ella’s skin crawled. This town had a lot of old people living in it, the sort of place where the kids had all grown up, moved away, and never come back. Some of the neighbors were nice and some were rude. That was how neighbors were. But not this guy. This guy occupied a category of unpleasant that was all his own. It wasn’t just the way he acted, like being a malevolent creep was an unconscious tick he couldn’t seem to shake. It was the way

he looked; he was skeletally thin, his skin so tight over his face you could almost see the skull beneath it. As he watched her, he was unnaturally still; Ella didn't know anyone else who stood like that, like he was made of stone. And she knew that when he started walking again, it would be more of a quick scuttle than a painful hobble, despite those brittle limbs; he was like a spider, the way his thin limbs carried him faster than should be possible. He passed by here every day at one o'clock on his daily walk, but Ella had forgotten to wait for him to pass before coming out.

Ella nodded sharply, her jaw clenched. "Good." She turned her back on him and resumed shoveling the driveway. The narrow path she had cleared had already drifted over, but she kept going, refusing to acknowledge his barbed comment. She had to give a considerable effort when tossing the snow over the snow bank if she didn't want it to slide back down into the driveway; at this point in the season, it was taller than she was.

"Little girls shouldn't be out all alone in weather like this. It's dangerous, especially here."

Ella didn't think seventeen was all that little. She caught him gesturing to the woods that bordered her house as she looked over her shoulder. She had played along that tree line when she was a small child. She knew every twist and turn, where the trees were the thickest and thinnest, and that the tallest brushing against the right side of the house was being choked to death by parasites. There was nothing 'dangerous' about those trees. "Okay. Bye." Some spiteful corner of her mind hoped the road was slicker somewhere along his route.

"I've lived here my whole life you know, my dear. They used to say strange things lived in those woods. Of course, you probably don't know about all that; no one believes in such things anymore. No one even talks about them. Too smart for superstitious stories."

"Hm."

"People used to go missing. The search parties and police always decided they got lost in the storms. Never did find any bodies though."

There was a pause. He stared at her. She stared back. Ella realized he wasn't going to go away until she answered. "What really happened?"

The corner of his lip twitched at his petty victory. "Some people blamed the wolves; even when the hunters kept it so that there were fewer of them in Michigan than there are now, they weren't as uncommon as you might think. Seem to like it around here, those wolves. But wolves leave trails and bones, my dear. No, it wasn't the wolves; most people knew it was something else."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it's been this way since people have lived here, my dear. This town was built for lumber, right on the edge of the forest. Every once in a while, someone would vanish. Some said that they could feel something watching them from the tree line, or that they heard things that weren't there; children laughing and the like. Seemed like people would go to investigate and disappear. A few even said they saw a child, but not many."

Ella raised an eyebrow. "A haunted forest?"

He shrugged, "I wouldn't go that far. But folk should still be careful." The corners of his mouth twisted slightly, a hint of a smirk.

"I'll keep that in mind," Ella replied dryly.

Mr. Peterson paused. For once, his face matched his voice when he said, "You don't believe me. Do you, my dear?"

Ella shrugged. Mr. Peterson looked at her for a moment before regaining his composure.

"Take care, my dear." Mr. Peterson gave her one last hideous smile to remember him by and scuttled away as suddenly as he had appeared, disappearing into the blizzard like a shade that had never been there in the first place.

Silence followed in his wake, the kind that often occupies winter. It was broken only by the rhythmic, uncomfortably high-pitched scrape of Ella's shovel sliding across the concrete driveway at a steady pace. Over the next two hours, she managed to clear out most of the snow. It always drifted over, but it wasn't as thick.

When she had only about a fourth of the driveway left, she went inside to warm up; the cold had soaked through her gloves and boots. She turned on the kettle and made some hot chocolate. While she was inside, she looked at the calendar; her mother wouldn't be off work until eight tonight. Frozen pizza it was. Ten minutes later, she walked back outside and resumed shoveling, her fingers and toes no longer numb.

The wind had died while she was inside but the branches from the nearby pines still creaked, as if they had taken on enough life to complain about the cold on their own. There was nothing soft about the rigid trunks and sharp needles, nothing comforting about the shadows that shrouded the forest floor. Ella cursed psychotic fossils and their stupid stories. Then she shoveled faster.

She finished shoveling the last part of the driveway in record time and let out a sigh of relief. Trees were just trees. She walked up onto the porch and opened the door, almost not hearing it.

The giggle.

Ella froze. She stared at the door for a few seconds, her mouth going dry. She could feel eyes on her back.

Slowly, she turned her head and looked over her right shoulder.

A small, pale hand clutched the bark of the diseased tree.

Ella's eyes crept from the hand to the white face half concealed behind the bark, red hair bound by pink ribbons motionless in the now dead air. It was an innocent sort of face, the face of a small girl; small nose, full lips, curious eyes. But that one eye just looked at her intently, a dark iris empty of anything childlike, consuming every coherent thought and numbing the world away.

The officer stood knocking on the old man's front door for some time, broad shoulders hunched against the cold, before Mr. Peterson decided to open it.

"May I help you, Officer Riley?" Mr. Peterson smiled. As was his habit, his words and smile managed to unnerve.

The officer swallowed. "As you may have heard, Ella Greene has recently been reported missing. We are asking neighboring residents to give their accounts of that day."

"Oh yes, I heard. Poor girl. Tell me, Officer, has anyone considered the wolves?"

JENNA MICHEL



Frail
oil on wood panel