

Pelsnik's Everything Emporium

She was beautiful once, though one wouldn't think it to look at her. The pride of her town, a roadside attraction like no other.

But, the fire.

A few sparks from some old wires, and now Pelsnik's Everything Emporium is a husk, her interior ravaged by flames, her many treasures lost. It is only by grace she stands at all.

Ah, but soon. Soon, she will reopen as Pelsnik's Everything Museum: Memorial to the Greatest Tragedy in Blistering History. Mr. Pelsnik works long hours to construct the main attraction, a life-size diorama of his Emporium in her glory days. She is open for business during construction, but visitors are rare. Pelsnik does not mind. He focuses on the work.

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Every day after breakfast, Pelsnik settles on the porch and begins to carve a new piece for the display. The task before him

today is challenging. He works at the head awhile, begins shaping facial features. Holds it at arm's length.

He is not pleased.

Though realistic, the effect is wrong. He means to render the mouth in a welcoming smile, but for all his skill, Pelsnik has never mastered such expressions. The face looks all a-grimace, eyes a-bulge, teeth bared like a threatened dog. He begins reshaping the lower lip.

A noise draws his attention; a little car has stopped on his property. He sets his work aside, smooths his cotton undershirt. Important to make a good impression. Travelers talk.

A small girl slams the passenger door, stomps over, curls askew and lip jutting. Another follows, bigger than she but only just. Pelsnik expects a mommy or a daddy to appear next, but squinting into the little car he realizes the two are alone.

"Excuse me, sir?" Big Sister says. She grabs Little by the shoulder. Little shrugs her off.

"Hello." It has been some time since he spoke to a stranger. He directs his attention back to the head, digging his knife into a wooden cheek. "I am Mr. Pelsnik."

Big Sister asks how far is Spokane.

"Questions are only answered for paying guests of tour." He gestures to a sign which lists the price of admission, one dollar apiece.

"I just need directions," Big Sister says, as though this were an important distinction. As though block after block of soft pine would fall like manna from the heavens for Pelsnik.

"Paying guests only," he says, and returns to his work. The girl retreats.

Pelsnik scowls down at the thing in his lap. The mouth is wider now on one side than the other, and already the gaping maw threatens to consume the whole of the face. He turns his attention instead to the nose.

Then: a shout, a thud. Big Sister kicks a tire, seethes, composes herself. Trots back to Pelsnik, smiling and asking can she please use the phone.

"Amenities," he says, flicking his knife, "are available only to paying guests of tour."

"But I locked my keys in my car. All my money's inside."

Pelsnik, he is not without pity, but what if he should make an exception, and the word of it should spread? You did it for the girl, it is only fair, visitors would say. Pelsnik, forced to accommodate, would lose income, perhaps starve.

Still - they are only children. As he thinks on this, Little produces a handful of coins from her tiny pocket, totaling one dollar ninety. He nods. "It will do."

Big Sister asks him again where is the phone. She is pushy, this girl, eager to leave. A stranger to the area, she must take the Emporium for any old roadside shop, offering nothing more than glass-bottled sodas, perhaps a record-setting twine ball or some other foolishness.

He smiles. Little does she know.

Oh, if only his monument were complete! But there is enough, he thinks. With words alone, he will paint these girls a picture worth the price of admission.

The nose is nearly done. He shaves a bit from the bridge, mimicking the odd bend in his own.

The knife slips, the nose rolls down the steps. Pelsnik watches, throat tight. Heat clouds his mind, obscures his eyesight. In time he realizes he is on his feet, bashing the head against the porch rail. He turns it over in his hands and sees a vision of his own death in the thing's horrid, collapsed face.

The frightened girls stare, but no matter. This will be soon forgotten. Pelsnik tosses his ruined twin out of sight, clears his throat.

"Welcome to Pelsnik's Everything Museum," he says, testing the words aloud for the first time, "Memorial to the Greatest Tragedy in Blistering History. I am Mr. Pelsnik." He holds for applause; in its absence, he presses on. "Soon we will venture within to behold the great and wondrous beauty, so tragically destroyed those many years ago."

Big Sister fidgets, but Little, she is listening. Pelsnik smiles.

"Such wonders await you within, ladies and gentlemen. But first, a bit of history."

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Pelsnik is out of practice. He finds himself digressing too much into the history of Blistering township and of the Pelsnik clan. The girls are not as awed by all this as one might hope.

As he continues, though, he begins to remember what it is to have an audience. He details the rarities which passed through the Emporium in her prime: the damaged Egyptian mummies which brought fortunes both good and ill; the haunted sheepskin which could be heard muttering to itself in the night; the

luminescent wind-up toys, once favorite entertainments of the Romanovs, now banned from the European continent.

By the story's tragic climax, Pelsnik feels his skill as a storyteller restored. In tears, he recounts the moment he learned of his own dear mother's demise in the fire. "But truly she will never die," he finishes, "Not as long as her Emporium still stands."

The silence that descends feels holy.

Big Sister speaks up: "Can I use the phone now?"

His jaw tightens, heavy eyebrows knit. He would scold her for rudeness, but what if then she were to run to town, spreading word about mean old man Pelsnik?

"Right this way, little girl." He forces his lips into a courteous rictus and throws open the door. "Welcome to Pelsnik's Everything Emporium."

As Pelsnik eagerly watches for the girls' reactions, time seems to slow. Their expressions transform gradually into identical masks of fear and disgust. He turns to look within, and sees his beautiful Emporium (did he remember to warn the girls of the ongoing construction?) through their eyes: the floor unswept, the soot-blackened windows not cleaned since the

fire, the life-sized wooden dolls milling about with their blank, pupil-less eyes.

He is proud of his dolls, of course. Pelsnik has carved dozens of unique human figures to portray the hoards which once flocked to his Emporium. They are stunningly lifelike, lovingly crafted, each distinct in its personality.

They are not yet painted, however, and the dim lighting mutes the fine detail of their features. A few in need of dusting have collected cobwebs; ash from the charred ceiling marring the shoulders of others. At a glance, it may appear that Pelsnik makes a habit of collecting discarded department store mannequins. He has yet to build any set pieces, and so the figures browse through an empty shop like madmen.

Now the girls will surely run to town, spreading word that there is no need to visit crazy old Pelsnik at the Emporium, for he has only a filthy store and a packrat's hoard of trash to his name.

"Gaze upon the horror and misery of the once-great beauty, now in ruin!" Pelsnik bellows, attempting to salvage things. "She is a work many years in the making. Upon completion, visitors will encounter a lifelike replica of the Emporium as she was on her final day." The girls' faces are difficult to

read. With a hint of apology, he adds, "Only she is not ready yet. The Memorial is under construction, you see."

The girls continue staring, blank as uncarved wood. Pelsnik busies himself, adjusting the arm of a young lady shopper with a high forehead and a thin, sad mouth.

Finally, Big Sister asks again to use the phone.

He leads her to the back room, leaving Little alone. It takes some time to find the telephone (the pointless device has been packed away for years), and they have only just located the thing when they hear a ghastly scream.

Big Sister dashes to the front, followed by Pelsnik. They look about. Little is gone.

"Mia!" Big Sister is hysterical already. "Mia, where are you?"

Another scream. This time, Pelsnik locates the sound. With a gasp, he races up the stairs, pushing Big Sister out of his path harder than is perhaps kind.

Little sobs in the hallway of his upstairs apartment. A door stands ajar; the girl has found Mama's room.

"Mia, what's wrong?" Big Sister emerges from the stairwell and stumbles, almost falling, for nearly every inch of the floor

is covered in aborted arms and legs. Pelsnik, however, navigates the familiar chaos with ease.

"There's a dead body!" Little shrieks. "He has a dead body in there!"

This, while true, is not so ghoulish as Little makes it sound.

Pelsnik's late mother, who has been carefully preserved and whose remains receive quarterly maintenance, is kept respectfully out of sight in her own private bedroom. He disturbs her only once per week, to dust her glass-topped coffin. This arrangement is, of course, temporary. When the Memorial is complete, Mama will be solemnly displayed, in much the manner of the late President Lincoln, whose tragic corpse once traveled the country by train so a nation could pay its respects.

"It is not right you enter a man's home and rummage through his things, little girl!" Pelsnik says. He pushes Mama's door closed and grabs Little by her shoulders, meaning only to get her attention, to show her the severity of her trespass. The child sobs.

"Let go of her!"

"She's dead," Little blubbers, "Tabby, she's dead."

Big Sister seems to hear these words for the first time. Her small face pales. She kicks the debris from her path and, trembling, places herself between Pelsnik and Little. Both girls weep, begging for their lives.

His face growing hot, Pelsnik flees down the stairs. He slumps against a wall, rubs his forehead. These girls, they will run to town, tell the people that old Pelsnik is a killer. His dear mother's carefully preserved body will become, in the retelling, a bloody butchered corpse; Pelsnik's hand on Little's shoulder, a slap across her face. And then who will come and see his Memorial, once it is complete?

To what use, all his labor?

His life's work, wasted.

His stomach churns.

He goes to the closet. Takes out an axe.

Little feet patter down the stairs, then stop all at once. The girls have spotted him.

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Later.

Pelsnik lays sprawled across the floor, breathing heavy, axe discarded. Mutilated parts surround him every way he looks. He fears he may be sick.

The girls are long gone. Run off sometime while he was occupied with the demolition of dozens of wooden bodies. By now the children will have flagged a motorist and been delivered to a police station, or home to mommy and daddy. Telling tales already, no doubt. Pelsnik lurches to his feet and collects the remains. Years of labor, lost.

But no use to sulk, he thinks. This can be corrected.

Yes. He will start immediately. Work at double, triple pace, and yet with greater artistry than ever before.

He goes to retrieve some wood from the shed out back and passes the girls' little car. Sooner or later they will have to return for it, and when they do, he will win them back. Give them a real show. Capture all the glory and splendor of the Emporium in her heyday.

What a fool Pelsnik has been. His work up to now was useless; a blessing that it has been destroyed! It will not do, he realizes, to simply recreate her as she was. He must touch something deeper.

Alone in the woodshed, he closes his eyes, summoning the grandest image of which he is capable: A circus. Elephants and horses and lions in feathered headdresses parade down the aisles. Trapeze artists swing overhead. Mermaids comb their long golden hair beside glittering pools, smiling and blowing kisses to the cheering audience.

The tent falls away, the pools expand to fill the horizon, and now the mermaids dip their dark blue tails into a sparkling, frothing sea. Squalling dragons soar overhead. The largest swoops down, plucks a pearl from the jaws of a giant oyster, and deposits it in the lap of the most beautiful siren. The maiden scratches behind his scaly ear, and the dragon purrs his contentment. And then the vision moves out, out, out, revealing all the world at once, and out further still until every star and planet of the cosmos is visible.

And there, at its center, is Pelsnik, neatly groomed, hair slicked back, dressed in the fine top hat and tails of a ringleader. He smiles, and his smile is kind and wise, mischievous and warm. He beckons to a group of delighted, wide-eyed children, and as the heavens dance, he peels the night sky up at its edge like the corner of a tent. Skipping and cheering, the little ones follow him within, trailed by happy and curious

parents, all dying to know the marvelous secrets of Pelsnik's Everything Emporium.

He opens his eyes.

Such a thing, it will not be easily rendered. This task will take all his skill, and more patience than he has ever before exhibited.

His fingers trail the smooth edge of the wood. He hesitates, breathes deep, and makes the first cut.

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