

## Welcome to Pelsnik's Everything Emporium

"Did you have a good trip?" Tabby asked. She glanced into the rearview mirror and saw her sister, Mia, picking at a scab on her elbow.

Mia silently wiped a little droplet of blood from the wound and sniffed it.

"I'm sorry I had to work so much," Tabby said. "I was supposed to have the whole week off but then a bunch of people quit. I really am sorry."

Mia wiped her bloody finger off on the pocket of her pale pink shorts.

"Did you like the horses?"

"Yeah."

"Who's your favorite?"

"I dunno."

Tabby's job operating a carousel had impressed Mia at first, but you could only go around and around so many times before the whole thing started to seem kind of pointless. Mia had lost

her taste for the horses pretty quickly. She'd spent the last few days of her visit drinking huckleberry Italian ices in the Carousel Café while Tabby pulled levers in the operators booth and shouted into a microphone, "Okay, these ponies are slowing down but they're not stopped yet so please keep your seatbelts on..."

"Are you excited to go back to school?"

Suddenly, Mia was bolt upright, pressing her face against the window with a furrowed brow.

"What's that say?"

"What?"

"That, there." She pointed to a green-and-white highway sign.

"Pelsnik's Everything Emporium next exit," Tabby read.

"Can we go?"

"What is Pelsnik's Everything Emporium?"

"It's an *emporium*."

"Babe, I think 'emporium' just means 'store.' It's probably a gas station."

"No, it's like a store but it's more and it's cooler."

"How do you know?"

"Please can we go? Please please please, Tabby?"

Tabby sighed. Mia hadn't looked this excited all week.

"I guess we can check it out. But don't get your hopes up."

Mia was hooting and cheering so loud that Tabby didn't think she'd heard that last part

The big wooden sign at the bottom of the off-ramp said "Welcome to Pelsnik's Everything Emporium" in big circus letters. A smaller sign dangling from the larger one by two thin chains added: "Site of the Greatest Tragedy in Blistering History."

The off-ramp gave way to a dirt road which snaked its way through a field of grass and led right up to the front door of the Emporium itself. A big sign that spanned the length of the sad little wooden storefront once again declared the name: "Pelsnik's Everything Emporium."

"They give tours!" Tabby followed Mia's gaze to a handwritten sign near the front door advertising "Tours \$1 dollar." She was out of the car and bolting for the store before Tabby had fully stopped the car.

An old man was sitting on the front porch. Tabby hadn't noticed him before. He had long, slender limbs, but his belly was big and round. His thick tweed pants were too heavy for the heat, and there were dark circles of sweat under the arms of his short-sleeved white shirt. An old, spotted dog was curled up at the old man's feet, watching as he carved a big wooden block into the shape of a human leg.

The old man's name was Mr. Pelsnik, Jr., although Tabby didn't know that. Nobody in town could remember his first name, or that of his father. Mostly they just called him Pelsnik.

"Hello!" Mia called, bounding down the driveway and up the porch steps. Tabby had to run to catch up with her. "We want to take the tour. May I please pet your dog?"

The dog, curled up with his chin on Pelsnik's foot, was black and white with grey on his muzzle and wheezed when he breathed.

"This is not my business," Pelsnik said without looking up. "You must ask Spot." He shaved a little excess wood off the leg's pinkie toe.

Mia crouched down near the dog. "Hello, Spot," she whispered gently, offering her grubby little hand. "May I please pet you?"

Spot gingerly sniffed and then licked her hand, his thick black tail lightly slapping the porch.

"Good boy. Good, good boy." Mia scratched behind his silky black ear.

"Pah!" Pelsnik's knife had slipped and now the wooden pinkie toe was rolling down the porch steps. He threw the leg to the ground with a curse. Spot bristled and jumped to his feet. His tail had stopped wagging.

"Shh, Spot, it's okay," Mia said, moving in to pet him again. He growled softly as she stroked his cheek.

"Mia, no!"

Tabby grabbed Mia by the shoulders and yanked her back just as Spot's yellow teeth snapped the air.

"Lemme go," Mia grumbled, shrugging her off as Spot returned to his resting place near Pelsnik's feet.

Tabby watched as the old man heaved himself to his feet, hobbled down the steps to retrieve the wooden leg, then sat down again and began inspecting it for damage.

"He tried to bite her." The old man was absorbed in running his finger over the spot where the toe had been severed. "Excuse me, sir?"

Finally he looked up.

"Your dog tried to bite my sister."

He stared at her, expressionless.

"You shouldn't have let her pet him if he bites."

Pelsnik groaned with the effort of leaning back in his chair. "Spot, he is not a mean dog," he said. "Only he doesn't like liars." He leaned in to get a closer look at Mia, who flinched away from his briny breath. "Have you been lying, little girl?" He asked. "Have you been telling mommy stories?"

"No." Mia was pressing herself against Tabby now. "And she's not my mom, she's my sister."

"What a big sister," Pelsnik said, running his eyes over Tabby. "So much bigger."

"I was a surprise," Mia said.

Pelsnik snorted. "I knew families with surprise daughters like you when I was young," he said. "Bad young girls would go away to visit distant family, and when they returned they had brand new baby sisters. Big surprise." He dry lips creaked into a yellow grin.

"Let's go," Tabby said as she grabbed Mia's hand and hurried down the driveway.

"No! We have to take the tour!"

"Mia, there's nothing here and this guy's weird."

"I want to see inside! I want to take the tour!"

"We'll find something else to do." Tabby reached the car and began fumbling through her pockets for her keys.

"If the little lady wants to take the tour, the little lady should take the tour," Pelsnik shouted through cupped hands. He shouldn't have been able to hear her from all that way, Tabby thought. "The sad tragic story of Pelsnik's Everything Emporium is the defining moment of Blistering history."

"No thank you!" Tabby called over her shoulder as she rifled through her purse.

"This isn't fair," Mia said, slouching against the car. "You said we could. You *said*."

"Oh, no," Tabby said. "No, no, no, no."

"What?"

Tabby cupped her hands around her face as she peered through the driver's side window. There they were, draped over the emergency brake: her keys. She tried the door handle, although she knew it was useless.

"I thought I had them. I really, really thought I did."

"*Again?* You locked your keys in the car *again?*"

Tabby chewed her lower lip. She wanted to cry.

They sulked together for a moment but then, suddenly, Mia straightened up, grinned at her sister and said, "I guess now we have time to take the tour."

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According to Pelsnik, the "amenities" of Pelsnik's Everything Emporium were for "paying guests of tour only."

"My money's all in the car," Tabby had objected, but Pelsnik had insisted on payment up front and so Mia had produced a crumpled five dollar bill from her pocket (Tabby didn't know where she'd gotten it) and handed it over. Pelsnik smoothed and examined the bill, and then, although the sign advertised "Tours \$1 dollar," tucked it into his shirt pocket and said, "No change."

"Can I use your phone now?" Tabby asked through gritted teeth.

"Save all questions for after," Pelsnik replied. Cupping his hands around his mouth again, he shouted, "All for the three fifteen tour!" Mia glanced around the empty lot, then took a small step toward him. After a brief hesitation, Tabby did the same.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Pelsnik began with a broad sweep of his arm, "Welcome to Pelsnik's Everything Emporium, which as you have heard is the Site of the Greatest Tragedy in Blistering History." He paused, and Tabby strongly suspected he was waiting for applause. Receiving none, he quirked an eyebrow in annoyance and moved on. "I, as doubtless you know, am the famous Mr. Pelsnik, Jr., the once proprietor of the Emporium who now, in the twilight of her demise, must act as her caretaker and share with all the world of her tragic downfall."

"What does 'blistering history' mean?" Mia asked.

"Of course, Blistering is no stranger to tragedy," Pelsnik said, ignoring her. "There was the Summer of the Many Bees, of course, and the reign of Handsome Jack the lady-stranger, but the destruction of Pelsnik's Everything Emporium pales these incidents to the level of mere quibbles.

"Soon, we will venture within to see the terrible beauty that once was." Mia inhaled audibly at this. "But first, a bit of history."

Mr. Pelsnik, Jr. Was, he said, the only son of Mr. Pelsnik, Sr and Ms. Lena Two Wolves-Pelsnik. Together, Mr. And Ms. Pelsnik had built the Emporium from the ground up. They invited the whole town to their opening ceremonies; big-bellied Ms. Lena cut the ribbon with her sharp silver sewing scissors, then doubled over and clutched her stomach with a groan. She told Mr. Pelsnik, Sr to get ready, and with the entire town of Blistering, Washington as witness she delivered Mr. Pelsnik, Jr out onto the very spot on the porch where he now stood, telling the tale. Mr. Pelsnik, Sr used Ms. Lena's sewing scissors to cut the cord.



"A sister to Mr. Pelsnik, Jr, his Emporium," Pelsnik announced, his eyes fixed above the heads of the two sweaty girls. "And as any good brother, Mr. Pelsnik, Jr, he was taught to protect her above all else.

"'She will outlive us both,' his parents told him, 'and so you must learn to care for her. She will outlive you as well, and so you must have a son who will care for her when you have gone.'"

"Or a daughter?" Mia asked.

Pelsnik blinked. "What?"

"Could you have a daughter to run the Emporium?"

He glared. "Well, Mr. Pelsnik, Jr he has no daughter anyway nor no son. Now it is time to listen and not to ask, little girl."

In her glory days, Pelsnik said, the Emporium sold groceries, toiletries, exotic fabrics, recovered antiques, mystical totems, stamps, toys, venomous reptiles, artifacts too sacred and ancient for museums, and homemade canned goods as well as "everything else a body might want."

"What's a totem? What kind of reptiles? Were there komodo dragons?"

Pelsnik didn't answer. Instead, he talked about his mother's famous canned goods and Mr. Pelsnik, Sr's last words to his son<sup>1</sup> and all the distinguished persons who had visited the Emporium over the years, among them a former governor of Idaho and a well-known rodeo clown.

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<sup>1</sup> "You are all she has left. Do not leave her an orphan."

The whole thing was hard for Mia to follow. She dug the toe of her shoe into the dirt, half-listening. A black beetle crawled up on the toe of her white sneaker. She scooped the bug up into her hands and held her discovery out to Tabby. Tabby smiled and gave her a quick thumbs up.

"Eh-heh-hem." Pelsnik cleared his throat; the girls turned to find he was staring at them, his bushy gray eyebrows knitted together.

He seemed to be waiting, so Tabby offered, "Sorry."

Pelsnik nodded, then resumed staring over the girls' heads. "But then," he continued, his voice heavy with significance, "tragedy struck."

Mia turned her attention back to the beetle. Tabby bit her lip and squeezed Mia's bony little shoulder.

"One day early one morning," Pelsnik began, "Mr. Pelsnik, Jr, he comes out of the back room and he stands behind the counter, and he waits for the customers to come."

He folded his hands above his belly and waited to illustrate.

"He is minding his own business when Spot he starts to bark, and Spot he barks and he barks and he howls and he howls and Mr. Pelsnik, Jr, he is wondering 'What could be wrong with my dog?'"

Spot's ears perked up. He sniffed Pelsnik's hand, then delicately licked it.

"Spot, he is running back and forth like a mad man going roo-roo-roo," Pelsnik said, absently patting the old dog's head, "and so Mr. Pelsnik, Jr he goes to see what is the problem and there, in the very back room where just he was this morning, he sees a raging fire."

Now Pelsnik made hissing and popping noises, his gnarled fingers curling and uncurling in front of his face. Tabby guessed this was meant to represent flames. Mia glanced up from her beetle and squinted at Pelsnik as he bobbed back and forth, eyes wide, fingers wiggling and spit spraying from his lips. This went on for an excessive amount of time.

Finally, Pelsnik straightened up, wiped his chin, and continued.

"The fire has taken nearly all of the back room now, and so Mr. Pelsnik, Jr, he runs for the phone and he calls the fire brigade, and he grabs what precious valuables he can carry in his arms and out the door he runs, with Spot nipping at his heels."

Pelsnik stared off into the distance and didn't say anything more. This went on for an excessive amount of time.

"Is he okay?" Mia finally whispered.

Tabby licked her lips. "Sir, are you okay?"

He didn't respond right away, and Tabby had the fleeting concern that he had died in front of them and somehow managed to stay standing. Mia slowly reached out to touch him. She was half an inch from his arm when he suddenly shuddered and spat out, "Seven minutes!"

Mia shrieked, then slapped both hands over her mouth. Alarmed, the beetle scurried up to her shoulder. Tabby bit her lip.

But Pelsnik didn't seem to notice the disruption. "It took seven minutes for the fire brigade to arrive," he said. "And in that seven minutes, Pelsnik he watched the destruction of everything he loved, everything Mr. Pelsnik, Sr and Mrs. Two Wolves-Pelsnik had built. The fire spread with unusual speed, so said the fire brigade. What you see now are the Emporium's blackened bones, but her soul no longer remains. And now until he too feels his soul called away, Mr. Pelsnik, Jr he must all his days sit by the grave of his only friend and tell the tale of her tragic demise."

He sat back down on his stool and bowed his head. Spot curled up on top of his right foot.

There was silence for a moment. Then Mia's beetle crawled into the sensitive crook of her elbow and made her squeal. Pelsnik's head shot up, but Tabby spoke up before he could.

"Um, sorry about your store. That was really sad. Can we use the phone now?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Very well, respectful listeners," he said. "If you will now please follow me, you may solemnly observe the once great ruins of Pelsnik's Everything Emporium."

Mia had tuned out most of his lecture, but she could feel her heart pounding with anticipation as she followed Pelsnik inside. This was the moment she'd been waiting for, the moment she got to see the inside of a real Emporium, with water damaged magic carpets and cracked crystal balls that would shock themselves back to life when she touched them.

But the Emporium was nothing.

It was just a dusty, empty shack with soot smeared on the windows so no light could get in. It smelled like mold and smoke. The walls and floor were all scorched black. A few sooty shelves in the corners held lumps of melted plastic, nothing recognizable. The only things that

stood out in the nearly empty room were a table heaped high with piles of junk and a weirdly new-looking checkout counter in the corner.

The disappointment on Mia's face made Tabby want to cry. She watched as Mia drifted over to the little table, which was labeled "TREASURES SAVED FROM DOOMED EMPORIUM." Mia picked up a jar and blew the dust off to read the label: "cherry preserves." It was only half-full, and just above where the preserves ended a spider had built its web and then died. Mia scooped the beetle off her shoulder and let him loose on the table.

Tabby kissed the top of Mia's head, then whispered, "I'm sorry, bud. We'll go soon." Mia solemnly poked at a large potato sprouting eyes in every direction and didn't respond. As Tabby walked away to ask about the phone again, Mia spotted something that could be a crystal ball. On closer inspection, though, it turned out to be just a snow globe, though, which had somehow been drained of all its water. The little plastic snowman inside was turning yellow. Mia set it down and picked up a little glass vial. Maybe it had some potion inside, she thought, although probably not. She looked around to make sure no one was watching (they weren't; "I thought the tour *was* over, just let me use your phone," Tabby was saying) then took a small sip. She coughed and spat the liquid out on the floor. It tasted like her grandmother's old perfume.

The rest of the stuff on the table wasn't much better: a dented tin top decorated with a clown's smiling face; a can of beans; a silver cigarette lighter. Mia flipped the lighter's lid open and pressed down on the little lever as hard as she could, but it wouldn't ignite.

Over at the checkout counter there were candy bars and cigarettes behind a glass display case, on top of which sat a cash register with strange levers on it that looked about a hundred years old. But there was something wrong with the whole thing. It seemed not quite real,

somehow. It wasn't until Mia was standing right in front of the counter that she realized it actually wasn't real; the whole thing was just a flat piece of wood painted to look like a check-out counter. She backed up a few steps to look at the whole thing again; now that she knew, it didn't look as convincing and she didn't understand how she'd ever been fooled. She glanced over her shoulder. Tabby and Pelsnik were still bickering in the doorway. She took a few more steps back and squinted her eyes, trying to make the painting look real again, but the illusion was gone.

The painting was standing a couple feet away from the wall, propped up from behind by something. Maybe there was something else painted on the other side, Mia thought. She poked her head around the corner and screamed at what she saw there.

"Mia?" Tabby was running over to her. "What's wrong?"

"Look." Mia pointed at a legless Mr. Pelsnik, Jr that lay on the ground, staring blindly up at them with pupilless eyes. His resemblance to the real Mr. Pelsnik, Jr was striking, although the doppelganger didn't have a lower body, looked a bit younger and was carved out of unpainted wood.

Tabby knelt down to examine the delicately detailed knuckles of the dummy's right hand, which delicately grasped a small Zippo lighter.

"Is that the same one from the table?" Mia asked.

"What?"

"This is not ready yet!" Pelsnik cried, bounding over to them. "Shoo! Shoo!"

"What is it?" Mia asked.

"Away!" Pelsnik's face was sweaty and red. "The exhibit will not be ready for years. Get away, you."

"Mia, come on." Tabby tried to take her hand but Mia wriggled it away and stood her ground.

"What exhibit?"

Pelsnik's jaw tightened. "When it is finished, visitors of the tour will walk through a replica of the Emporium as she was on her final day," he said through gritted teeth. "But not yet. It is not ready yet. Away, you bad child!"

"When will it be ready?"

"Mia--"

"Shoo!"

"How long ago was the fire?"

"You will go away from my work now! The both of you!"

"Mia, seriously. Come on." Tabby grabbed Mia's arm and pulled her out from behind the painted counter.

"Such disrespect." Pelsnik shook his head and turned to walk away.

"Hey, wait. I still need the phone," Tabby said.

"How did the fire start?"

"Mia, stop."

"Was it the lighter?"

Pelsnik froze, shoulders stiff, his back to them. Tabby's eyes shifted back to the fake counter.

"Wait," she said. "How *did* the fire start?"

Pelsnik slowly turned to face her, his face red. Tabby knew she'd made a mistake. "Out," he said between gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry," Tabby said. "Really. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. Just let me use your phone and we'll leave you alone."

"No phone! Out with you! You defile her grave with your presence."

Tabby's protest was cut short when Pelsnik picked up the plywood check out counter and hurled it against the wall. When it crashed to the ground unharmed, Pelsnik picked it up and beat it against the floor until it began to crack and splinter into little pieces. "Out!" He cried. "Out, out, out!"

"Roo-roo-roo!" Spot wailed, wagging his tail and galloping in circles around the old man.

With the counter destroyed, Pelsnik turned to his wooden doppelganger and frantically began trying to pry its arm off.

Both girls just stood and stared, paralyzed by their confusion. It wasn't until a wooden arm careened just inches above Mia's head that Tabby realized they had to get out of there.

"Come on," she said, grabbing Mia's hand.



"Where are we going?" Mia asked, struggling to keep up with Tabby's long strides as they ran out the door and down the porch steps.

"I don't know," Tabby said. "We'll find a phone."

Mia glanced over her shoulder just in time to see Pelsnik emerging from the Emporium, looking haggard. He had decapitated the dummy and held its head, a duplicate of his own, as he stared right at Mia. Then he stepped down off the porch, and Mia thought for a second that he would chase them. Instead, he walked around to the back of the store and out of sight. She wondered where he was going. She was still wondering when they got to the highway.

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Pelsnik tossed the head onto the pile. It was getting bigger and bigger, this pile, a record of his failures. Sharp wooden shards and dismembered dummy body parts jutted out here and there. The pile got bigger every year. Pelsnik had such hopes for what a proper memorial to his Emporium could be, but he never got much built before somebody came along and messed everything up for him, the way these two had. But when the universe's malignant forces made themselves known, Pelsnik didn't despair. He simply added the scraps to the pile and began again.

A fresh block of wood in hand, Pelsnik sat down on the front porch and delicately began to carve. The work was hard, yes. It was hard to honor his lost love, but Pelsnik would do it for her, because she was his Emporium and because he had promised to take care of her.

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