

Gabbie Zombie

by Caleb Stright

He was introduced to the neighbor girl, her hands still pink from birth, as Gabriella; read “Gabrielle” from later grandparent birthday cards delivered, accidentally to him by the post, and “Yo Gabba Gabba” from the sign in her yard, just now, for the same occasion; but he didn't call her those. He didn't call her anything. He just shook his head.

He watched from the attic, on his belly, looking out the tiny window out over his roof, through the thick green limbs between, and shook his head, as they inflated the rainbow colored castle behind her house, lead in the burro for the pack of wild children to pet and ride.

Spoiled, he said to himself, still shaking. Just because a girl loses her mother.

He watched because he knew the things she'd do. The things she'd done. The missing birdhouse first. Then a pot from the back porch, painted with a yellow cat, some long-dead flower dangling over the clay. Things his daughter had made him long before she'd passed. Things he found in pieces, halved-roofs and shards, behind his work shed.

The trees he watched through, he'd made them to keep her out. Hadn't meant to, not at first. They had floated in, dead, from the swamp behind his home, an amoeba of gray water and white limbs that seemed to creep in the night toward the steps of his back porch. The rotted stumps had stacked and climbed like two dozen giant bones up those steps, to knock gently on his windows. He tore them down and pushed them back under the swamp's pudding skin.

They'd be back, of course, a dog pile, a tangle, knocking over his porch furniture. And to spite them, he got his ax. Filled himself with coffee and bourbon and cracked, splintered, frayed them, till the thick dermis that had wrapped their hearts laid about like clumps of manged hair.

And he let them lay, through the storm of the night, to find them the next morning, just one of them, one he hadn't cut too deeply, like a thick wild leek pushing up through the weave of gray fibers.

He made them days later after finding a fire in the reeds at the swamp's edge. He'd kept a torch there and tended it, sure for a long time that his daughter might pull herself out and need a way to find her way back to her bed. He made the trees after finding the torch knocked over, after finding the little footprints in the soft ground, after the dead trunks piled again. He started with one, pulled from the top of the pile and pulled it into his work shed, pushed its bench aside, chopped and carved with an adze, the soft and dry and old of it away, till he found something with the hardness of life and turned and carved, and dragged it to the property line, dug and buried the bottom of it, and he slept. And like the raw, exposed, green heart of the tree had been smothered before, like it had been wrapped so tight it couldn't breathe, it had grown in the black soil of his yard, when he went to it in the morning, like it was free.

He made a line of six of them, hoping they would be a wall. Each one different, bending to the moon with the contours of his carves, limbs wild where he'd gone too deep, and wet black wounds where he'd gone deeper.

And he watched her, like he had watched the swamp. But his little window could only see so much and he lost her for a day, maybe more. He came down from his window and circled his home, took stock of his remaining exterior belongings, a wind chime of moons, a garden hose, the pepper and tomatoes that had shrunken, neglected on the vine, and found the rest as it should be, save the patches of yellow, first near the shed, grass blades dead and brittle. And another patch along the porch steps, and another just under them. And when he knelt he found her squatting, in the far corner underneath, and in the slatted dark, saw only her eyes, wide and white.

She turned and ran and he chased. An arc toward the corner of his house, then wattling at a fevered pace, through the trees, into the yard behind her home. Her arms out and moving like rope, her

auburn hair caught and curling in the wind, over the white shoulders of her dress.

Her legs were cherubic, short and round, but he couldn't catch her and he couldn't breathe, bent over, hands in his cardigan pockets under the black limbs above; he huffed and watched her disappear around the white corner of her house.

He walked and tried to jog and found her, just her eyes again, and her raven crown, rising behind her father's torso, his back to the ground, head in the grass, arms out like falling. Her round eyes, then round face. Pupils propped open. From fear. But not for him.

For her father. His face, his neck, his hands, everything out from under his sweatshirt, gray.

Gabriella looked up from her father's splayed limbs to him, eyes more pupil than white, and he stepped and reached fingers toward the man's neck. But like he knew he wouldn't, he didn't find a pulse.

911. An ambulance. He thought. Some way to save this man. Give her back her father. And thought of running to his house for the phone. But he pulled his hand from her father's neck and it came back cold. And he looked to her house, to the screen door open, a girl-sized hole torn from the outside in, a box of cereal, upended and on the kitchen floor, and he shook his head.

She's lost, he told himself. A girl needs her father, just like a father needs his girl. And he thought of his own, sleeping and submerged, forever taken from him, under the mud-thick water.

He put his hand on the man's arm and found it different in death. Cold, yes, but as rough as any limb soaked through and left to dry. And he looked to her, her head back and her eyes to the sky, breathing a hundred times in that moment, like she'd forgotten how. And he grabbed her father by the feet, and slid and pulled him on his back, grunting with each pull and trying to step around her as she smacked his legs, to his yard. And when they had crossed the trees, he dropped her father's legs, and tried to catch her slaps and stop them. But her arms were spinning like a windmill, and he grabbed the feet and pulled again.

At the shed, and in the dark, he pulled him in, his chest and torso arching over the hump of the doorway, and used one hand to keep her out as he pulled the door closed.

He grabbed his adze from the bench and stood for a moment over the man, arms crossed and shook his head.

A man is gentler than a tree, he said, and got his draw knife, got down and knelt around the man's legs, close enough to open the man's shirt and lean the blade above his chest and draw it to himself.

And it whispered like any wood. And the blade moaned when he got too deep and tried to cut too much. And as the dead parts of him came off, in tendrils and dust, the man's chest began to move, like the hands around his heart had let go. And his shoulders moved and his eyes turned under their lids.

When it started, it pulled his eyes from the blade; he lost his focus and got too deep, made a purple wound above her father's heart.

And her father's head snapped to the side and his eyes snapped open. The whites now yellow and cracked red. And her father pushed himself out from under him, and turned and pulled open the door, out past his daughter, looked for a moment back at her, his chest exploding and collapsing like it'd been opened with holes and wouldn't hold its air. And he ran along the row of black trees, past his house, to the woods on the other side, toward some incandescent light, a blur soaking through.

And Gabriella ran too, her arms out and her fingers flexing, like she could catch onto him a hundred yards away.

And all he could do was follow, rustle through the dead leaves of the dead trees, past the torn-open screen door, and watch the woods swallow her.

They'd be going toward the light, he knew, and he pushed himself, stumbling over mossed over logs, creek water soaking into his loafers. He knew he'd find her worse than before. She had lost her father, but he had carved the scar deeper than it had to be.

So he began his Hail Marys, his crosses making him wobble as he moved. Behind his heart digging for some apology a child would

understand; one she could bear to hear the scores of times he'd have to repeat it before he died. Hoping for words like, 'Hail Mary, full of grace'; words that would weather the repetition.

And at the edge, thorns and prickles dug into him and limbs and leaves slapped as he pushed out of the trees and beside a garage. The light in front of it was on, and he limped, coughed and gasped toward the pool of white on the gray cement. He turned and he found the door of the garage up and them inside. Just at the edge of what the lamp and the moon gave off. A tangle of people. A mess. Arms and bodies confused. He could only move into the dark to see.

And when he shuffled in, he found three of them. Gabriella, her hands on her father, her father kneeling beside a woman on the pavement and his hands inside her chest. His hands wet and pushing some mass between them to his mouth. Squeezing and tearing, trying to push some fat lump down his throat. The girl tearing at her father's arm and jumping. And when he was done, he tossed the purple rind to the ground and moved to her.

He knew what her father would do, and he moved to a rack along the wall and found a hammer. He could hear her screaming. She had been soundless for days, but now, his back turned, she was frantic. And he turned, the hammer pulled back behind his head, and stomped toward her father.

But her father had her down. Her father's hands in her chest and she was wailing. And he put the hammer into her father's head. He pulled it back and made two more holes. And she was still wailing as he cracked and dug the hammer past the bone. And he kicked her father down. But Gabriella lay, head back on the concrete floor, eyes crushed shut and wailing. A fist size hole, black and smeared purple, just below her shoulder.

And he knew what would become of her. And he knew he should have done more. And he knew there was more he could do. And he took a knife from his pocket. And he sunk it in just below where he knew his heart should be. And he opened himself up; he dug it out, held it up to the moon, then cradled it to carve it, to shave off the old, hard parts of it, so it would fit inside of her. So it

would work

