

EMILY PAPE

What Papa was Saying

Clocks have a way of highlighting silence. The one in the dining room was especially effective this way. It was a cuckoo clock, a genuine one that never worked right. Always too fast or too slow, telling you it was five o'clock when it was eight in the morning. But it didn't do that now. Now it just ticked away, caught between the hour marks, punctuating the quiet with mechanical precision.

I looked outside, through the back door's window, and let out a sigh.

"Outside." A conversational tone that seemed louder than it was.

The response was immediate; the house erupted and echoed with the sound of scrambling paws, barreling towards me with unchecked excitement. Steve bolted down the stairs and slid around the corner; he was running so fast that he almost crashed and burned on the hardwood floor of the kitchen. It didn't faze him. His bright, buggy eyes were glued to the back door by which I stood, looking ahead to the waiting yard and a few hundred feet of freedom.

Then he was standing there, pressed against the doorframe. Muscles tense and alert. Nose shoved into the door. Eyes on the doorknob...sort of; Steve was cockeyed, so his eyes didn't seem to rest directly on the subject of his focus. He was a cute sort of ugly that managed to be endearing.

"You're an idiot, you know that?"

The tail flickered slightly.

I nudged Steve back with my knee so I could open the door

without running over his paws. The doorknob stuck and he shuffled impatiently, like a little kid waiting for his parents to give him the ice cream cone already. As soon as the door opened, he slithered through the gap and flew into the cold. I stepped into his wake, snow crunching under my boots.

Winter feels like paper cuts, but slower—that's what I have always thought. That's what it felt like now, the cold of the wind sinking into my face like disinfectant into broken skin. I hunched my shoulders, pulled the hood of my coat down lower; the horizon hovered just below the edge of the waterproof, plastic material. The icy rain from yesterday now acted as superglue, snaring snow against the tree branches as the flurries crashed down from the sky with feather-light grace. I blinked away tears, flinched from the brightness. It was a cold light, that white.

The florescent bulbs illuminated the sunken crags of Papa's face. His legs were concealed beneath the hospital sheets, but the sharp angles of his knees showed how the muscle had wasted away and disappeared.

Everyone sat around the hospital room in a nervous tension, visiting small talk and memory backtracks. Remember when Sonya was five? Remember when she covered the walls in crayon? Remember how she insisted she hadn't done it?

It wasn't funny then. It's hilarious now.

Steve bunny hopped through the bright snow, dashing towards the ice-encrusted pines that bordered the back of the yard. He didn't give me a second glance, but I knew he would not go past the trees. Steve was not the most intelligent beagle in the world, but he was strangely obedient that way.

"Steve's at home all alone." Papa's wrinkle-scarred face creased dramatically at his small frown.

"We've been stopping by. Letting him outside and feeding him," my mother assured him. She looked at her watch when she said it.

Papa nodded. He knew this. He still frowned. Mom and Dad moved onto the next subject, away from worry. Do you want us to bring you something? Something sweet? The nurse doesn't have to know. Are you sure? We could bring you some peanut brittle from home.

Papa doesn't care about peanut brittle right now, Mom. He cares about the dog sitting alone in his house, in the dark. I don't say it, but Papa gets a rueful gleam in his eyes when he looks at me. Papa and I didn't see each other more than five times a year,

but we could read each other perfectly.

I knew Steve wouldn't stray from the yard, but still I watched him. The flurries had distorted his silhouette into a blur that bounced happily through the white. He paused once, lifted his leg by one of the trees, and probably missed his mark completely.

He started to trace the perimeter of the yard and his sprint slowed to a brisk jog. Did it bother him that the neighbor dog occasionally wandered into our yard and peed on the pine trees too? I suppose it did. The alert body language and swaggering stride certainly said so.

He was asleep, when he disappeared. It was peaceful. But it was at night and the room was dark. Was he really asleep when it happened, or was he waiting? Did he listen to the clock down the quiet hall by the nurses' station? Did he listen as the fragmented seconds passed by, watching the ebbing remains of his life tick away?

Steve passed the shed on the right side of the yard. He paused behind it for a moment, most likely to sniff some unremarkable patch of snow. My chest tensed and eased only when Steve reappeared.

"We don't need a dog in the house. We just got new hardwood floors," Mother said.

"We can't take Steve to a shelter." My father wasn't angry, he was just stating what was known. Papa had been in a bad way for a while before he died. Had they already thought about this? Probably.

I left them talking and walked out to my car. There was a blanket in my trunk. I retrieved it and covered the passenger seat with it so Steve wouldn't leave fur everywhere for the next person who sat there. The digital numbers hovered green on the dashboard, six minutes ahead.

Steve was starting to pick up his paws, flinching from the cold. It was starting to become apparent to even him that he was not running through powdered sugar, but half-frozen water that stung smartly. It was then that it occurred to him that I was standing there and that I had thumbs capable of letting him back inside.

They met me at the entryway. Were they angry? I think so, but it didn't sway me.

Steve scrambled inside and sniffed at the unfamiliar house. He

smelled pork chops in the kitchen and ditched us for the enticing smell.

“What are you doing? We’ve been over this, Sonya, we can’t—”

“Papa wasn’t saying ‘Steve’s home all alone,’ Dad. He was saying ‘don’t leave Steve all alone.’”

I teased him a bit, before I opened the door. He was as eager to get back inside as he had been to get outside a few minutes ago. I placed my hand on the doorknob but did not turn it immediately and he wriggled with impatience. He snorted, his breath shooting out in irritated white smoke. But he waited. He waited for me to let him back into his new house.

And so I did. And I always would.