



## Shoofly

By Lillah Lawson

*January 1918*

*From the diary of Sivvy Shelnut*

*And so it tis another year.*

*I can scarce imagine a thing to celebrate, nor did I have anything to toast with...’less you count sassafras tea, of which I’m awful tired. I was up half the night with little Clay Jr; he had stomach pains and was crying into the wee hours of the morning. I got up with him and rocked him in the rocking chair on the porch, where it was awful cold; the kinda cold that settles in deep and you cain’t tell if it’s yer bones or yer teeth that’s a’rattlin’. The cold seemed to help little Clay some. He gets pains in his belly something awful, and is real prone to fevers. I been feedin’ him steady, but we ain’t had fresh vegetables on a long spell and he eats like a bird anyhow. Lordy be will I be glad for the Spring when we can plant us a crop. I’m sick to death of cornmeal mush and canned turnips.*

*I just hope Little Clay ain’t getting’ sick again, and it’s only his poor nerves that’s ailing him. My boy has always run hot and cold thataway. When he ain’t cuttin’ up like the dickens he’s hurtin’ in his belly. Betwixt his two contrary moods, it seems like I ain’t never to get a lick of rest. But oh, I love him so. And I love his father, so, too. I’m a lucky woman to have my boys when so many ain’t got theirs. Every day I say a prayer for Etheldred Aycock, our neighbor Marla’s boy, who was sent off to the War these three months past. I pray every day for him to come home to his Mama. She’s already lost her husband and her daughter and son is all she got left in the world.*

*I lost my whole fambly once, too, and I know what that feels like.*

*Life’s got a way to remind us what to be thankful for. And so it begins a New Year, here’s to 1918, and may it be better yet.*

*Late January 1918*

*From the diary of Sivvy Shelnut*

*“I’m Always Chasin’ Rainbows”*

*I shore do like that song. Clay turned on the radio after supper and that ditty was on, and he swopped me up and took me for a turn around the living room. Clay’s got bad knees but he was dancing up a storm, so who was I to stop him? I laughed to beat the band. Little Clay was dancing a jig around us and then the dogs started in, both hounds just a’yappin’ and a barkin’. I reckon we all liked that song fine!*

*It's been such a long spell since I listened to music and felt like that. Nobody but my Clay knows the truth about what happened to me less than two years ago. What little bit of yappin' there was 'round town, why, Clay shut folks up quick. I still don't know how he done it.*

*I wonder if one day I shall tell Clayton Jr., my little boy, about my days with the tent revival. It seems a story no youngin' ought to know, but the blood of Billy Rev runs through his veins, too. I just keep figurin' on it.*

*Clay says the past is the past, and best to let it stay dead and buried. Gen'rally I agree.*

*It's only that I have these fits, and I just cain't seem to shake 'em. In my fits I see things that ain't there, like people and such; things that don't make no logical sense, that cain't be before my eyes, and yet they are. The way they dance in front of my eyes and carry on sometimes I reckon they're tryin' to have me on, but no, I reckon it's just the way they do, and it ain't got much to do with me atall.*

*The good doctor down the road says these is "hallucinations" and they ain't real – my brain is makin' up things to see, things that ain't really there. But I wonder: is that true, though. Could it be that they is real and most folks just cain't see 'em? And because I'm the only one who can, they just say I'm mad?*

*I really do not know. I don't reckon it matters a lick – real or not, I shouldn't be able to see 'em, is all. And thank the good Lord I haven't in a long spell.*

*My hands still shake a spell, but that I can hide with a kitchen towel, lickety split.*

*Clay went to bed early with a tickle in his throat; he stayed out workin' on the buggy into the wee hours last night and I reckon he's done caught a cold. Tomorrow I'll make him a bit of broth, though Lord knows I ain't got a scrap of meat to make it with, so I'll be scraping the bottom of the can for some bacon grease. He'll like that. Clay loves bacon any way he can get it and I like to do for him any which way I can.*

*I owe him my life.*

*"I'm always chasin' rainbows..."*

*"Mama? Whassa rainbow?"*

I turn and stare at my little boy for a minute, disbelieving. "You ain't never seen a rainbow, Clayton Shelnutt Jr.? What in the world?" I turn back to the cornbread batter I'm mixing up with my wooden spoon, wishing I had a little buttermilk. Water works fine, but it sure don't do nothing for flavor. Ain't nothing I could do to help it, though. I pick up the bowl and pour the batter into the skillet, the wet mix hitting the hot oil with a satisfying crackle. One day I'll teach my little boy that trick; you heat the oil in the skillet first, over a hot fire, and get it real good and scaldin', before you pour in the batter. That's what gives it that crisp crust. Without the crust, cornbread ain't worth a lick.

I'll have to teach Hosey since I ain't got no daughters and sure ain't like to have none any time soon. My little Clay is a miracle baby. His Daddy calls him that all the time.

"Naw, Mama." He puffs out his little two-year old chest, a chest that's far too puny for a boy of his age. I try and I try to fatten him up, but he ain't never got much appetite. Been that way since he was a wean; he barely suckled when he was a baby.

"Well, we shall have to remedy that straight away," I say, pushing the hot skillet into the oven. "Tomorrow, I reckon. Now go git your Pa for supper. Cornbread'll be done in a jiffy." I always talk to my baby boy like he's a grown folk. My own Mama told me once that's how you get smart youngins.

My little boy runs out of the kitchen on his spindly little legs, his knees bowing out the way he'd been pretty much since birth. Skinny and *puny*, which was a word my Ma had used that I never much cared for, but it was true. He is a puny little thing; a runt, short and skinny with long arms and legs and a mouth to match. He don't say much yet, only bein' two, but he's already got some sass. He got both the puniness and the sass from me; his Pa, my Clay, is well over six feet tall and don't say much. He studies on a lot, but rare is the occasion that more than two sentences strung together come out of his mouth. I love him anyhow, because when the words do come out of his mouth, they're always kind.

He's a little too kind to the boy, you ask me; he lets Little Clay get away with things he ought never allow. We both do, tell the truth. Little Clay might be puny but he already got the two of us wrapped around his tiny finger, and Lord knows he'll give me gray hairs before my time, to match Clay's already salt-and-pepper noggin.

I'll have gray hair by next year anyhow, if things kept goin' the way they are.

The kitchen is real quiet. Off in the distance, I can hear Little Clay approaching Big Clay's office, knocking on the door with his tiny little hand. The air in here is heavy and suddenly cold, despite the hot skillet over the fire.

I wipe my hands on a tea cloth and flap it at the air, towards the corner, in a quick motion. "Shoo, fly." I say quietly, my voice hardly above a whisper. "Shoo on, now. Shoo, fly away."

The pest in the corner, decidedly not a fly, only looks at me with a wide, bright smile, as though it has very good news or perhaps a joke to tell. As I continue to flap the tea cloth at it, the smile only gets wider, wide enough to swallow a little slip of a gal like me whole.

"Now just you stop that," I whisper hotly. "I'll give you a piece of hot cornbread if you just stop."

"Stop what, Sivvy?"

I turn to see Clay standing in the doorway, his worn Bible held against his shoulder with a spotted hand, a lock of greasy hair hanging down over one eye. He's been workin' on his sermons all afternoon and he's no doubt tired; he's always tired. His nose is red and irritated; I wonder if he has clean handkerchiefs. It's hard to keep up with washing for three folks.

"Fly over in the corner," I say, gesturing to the wall. "Flies in this kitchen every day this week. Can't keep 'em out of the food."

"Flies. Huh."

We both know it's too damn cold for flies but he is being kind. Clay is always kind.

But he ain't no dummy and he knows what I see, and he knows that what I see ain't nobody else seein'.

"It ain't t'other, I swanny." I said by way of reassurance, and if he doesn't believe me, he gives no sign.

"Cornbread smells good." He says, and we both smile.



January 2020

Bullet Journal of LL

*I've been saying for at least two years now that I'm going to "cut back on social media" and I'm so full of it. For every week that I exclaim I'm "cutting back", my iPhone gleefully announces on Sunday morning that my social media usage is up by such-and-such percent. I'm sure I'm far from the only hypocrite in this area, but damn, I'm mad at myself for struggling so obviously with what is so clearly an addiction and one that I'm so grossed out at others for having. Every time my husband and I are watching some critically reviewed thing on Netflix or Hulu and out of the corner of my eye, I see him starting at that stupid phone, I want to knock it out of his hand. I always point it out, say, "Do you have to be looking at your phone right now?" I know I'm nitpicking. He doesn't get that much down time.*

*And while this is true and I know I'm being unfair because I work from home and have access to a computer and/or a tablet all day every day and my own social media presence is like, fifteen times more than his, I still roll my eyes and tell him he's making excuses.*

*But this time I mean it. This time I really mean it. I'm cutting back.*

*It started for me when I was so sick a couple of weeks ago. I've never been so sick in my life. I don't even know what I had; the doctor couldn't tell me. All she said was, "It's some respiratory thing; you'll just have to let it run its course. I don't like that crackle in your chest; if it gets worse I'll call in antibiotics in case it's bacterial pneumonia." I waited what, a day and a half? And I called and I begged. I don't even know how I managed to drive to the store; the pharmacist at Ingles handed me my bag and said in a low, concerned voice, "Honey, you don't look good. You need to go home and rest." All I'd done was rest for the past two and a half weeks, just laying half-dead on the couch watching *The Witcher* and that Leah Remini show about Scientology, binging until my eyeballs wanted to fall out from sheer exhaustion. Lying in a blanket made of my own sweat as my fever surged and dimmed and surged again. The only relief I could feel was standing in a scalding-hot shower, the water so hot it left welts on my skin, leaning with my entire weight against the shower walls, taking in deep, gulping, steaming breaths, hoping I didn't pass out while I was in there. At my sickest I was taking three twenty-minute scalding showers a day and it still wasn't enough. Those showers were the only time I could breathe, the only time the pain in my chest and ribs would abate.*

*During that period, I didn't spend much of my time online, because I was too sick to coherently follow anything, even a social media timeline. It was boring to me; I was tired. But when I did log in here or there I saw a lot of disturbing shit. That's nothing new; Twitter and Facebook have been a festering dungheap of hot takes, snark and soul-destroying BREAKING NEWS updates since summer 2016, but as the days went on, the headlines became more and more ominous, more and more frenzied, and worried, and something felt different. Eventually I just logged off all together and took the infamous "break" that every internet junkie says they're taking before coming back two days or possibly two hours later.*

*I think I lasted a week or so, and when I came back those headlines were creeping in harder. News from China. This virus, this thing that had just suddenly sprung up out of nowhere, it was killing people. And not like the flu, which we hear about every Winter, the majority of us ignoring because we're all young and invincible and careless, but something other than the seasonal flu. I accidentally clicked on a link in the trending topics #Wuhan and stumbled on a video, the captions in Chinese, but easily enough understood. In the video a person is covered by a sheet and they are having a seizure. Below, in the English commentary, someone had said, "This is all they can do for them when they reach this point. Total organ failure. This is how most of them die."*

*A chill crept up my spine. "It's probably a video from something else entirely, or it's fake." I thought, and clicked off. But that night, I had a nightmare, still coughing from my own lingering respiratory illness, still a crackle in my lungs, the inhaler I almost never needed down to a puff or two. I wasn't sure how I'd obtain another one. In that lull right after Christmas and before tax-time, money was scarce and inhalers cost over seventy-five bucks if you don't have insurance. I was really worried what I'd do when it ran out. I tried not to think about it too much.*

*Scariest than the news that was trickling out of China – the video of the doctor who had succumbed, his mask pinching his face, but his eyes searching and scared as they stare dead-on into the camera – was the utter apathy and almost complete rejection of it from most people on the Twittersphere (to say nothing of Facebook, where everyone was still arguing over whether not it was okay to grieve about Kobe Bryant). The disturbing headlines would break into the endless NeverBernieNeverLizNeverJoe just enough to grab someone's eye for a moment and then it was gone again, disappearing beneath the waves of endless political headlines and mindless outraged scrolling. I tried to do it, too. Night after night, still wheezing days later, I'd sit my phone face down on the nightstand, turn on the TV, and will myself to forget. "Now it's time to sleep," I'd tell myself silently, pushing myself down into the pillows. "Think about it tomorrow; for right now, let's just sleep."*

*Evidently I became Scarlett O'Hara. I'll worry about that tomorrow. Tomorrow is another day, yadda yadda.*

*Worry tomorrow, for now just sleep. It began to play on a loop, night after night, but it never really did work.*

*Because now it's even in my dreams.*



*Late March 1918*

*From the Diary of Sivvy Shelnutt*

*The newspapers is sayin' that this year's bad flu season is finally ending, I reckon because the cold weather finally broke. Today it's a certified scorcher; too hot for March. 88 degrees outside accordin' to Clay's old glass thermometer and I can finally walk out and water the tulips and daffodils (I can scarce believe they've already bloomed) without sneezing my face off. They say it's the driest March we had on record since God knows when. Lordy do I hate the Spring. I'd druther we go straight from winter to summer without so much as a pitstop and it'd suit me just fine.*

*Little Clay seems to like the Spring. He's been runnin' around in short pants all week long, tryin' to sing this funny but kinda mean song that a feller up the way, name of Rob Gum - he owns the Stew & Cue - taught him. It goes something like, "I'm branging home a baby bumblebee, won't my mama be so proud of me?" then the next line says, "Ow! He stung me! Well, I'm smashin' up the baby bumblebee, won't my mama be so proud of me...." And you slap your hands together at that part. I told Clay Jr. not to go smashing up no bumblebees, baby or otherwise, that he's like to get stung and bees don't mean him no harm no how. I had a cousin what was allergic to bee stings and the last thing I need is for my baby's face to swell up like bread dough with no full-time doctor in town no more. Doc is only in town twice a week, if that. He's been in Madison mainly, since they are still havin' folks with the flu up thataway. I hear it's a couple young folks, all caught it at the Spring dance, and a couple of 'em just cain't seem to shake it.*

*Don't make no sense to me, young folks dyin' from the flu like that. You always heared it was the old timers that did, or the babies that was sickly.*

*But I have learned in my short life that there's lots of things that don't make no sense, and the good Lord is the on'y one that knows the truth of it. All we can do is pray for understandin', or for peace if we can't get no understandin'.*

*They sayin' that we got to start this new "daylight saving time" or somethin', (another thing that don't make no sense), and push our clocks forward next week. Clay said he don't aim to do it. He reckons we'll just keep on keepin' time the way we been doin'. Imagine. Just thinking you can change TIME when time is the one that changes you. I ain't yet twenty years old and I know that.*

*"S-s-smashin' up the baby bumblebee...w-w-won't my mama be so proud of me..."*

*"Little Clay, you go warsh up for supper and quit smashin' pretend bumblebees, ya hear?"*

*"Yes'm." Clay trudges up the steps and into the house slowly, his toddling little legs covered in mosquito bites. I watch him, sighing with exhaustion. I've been scouring out the house all day long, trying to do a bit of spring cleaning since it's such a warm, sunny day. All the windows are open, letting the warm, fresh air in – for now it isn't quite so humid, but give it another month and it'll be like wearing wet wool any time you step foot off the porch – I've already scrubbed the baseboards, washed the*

floors, dusted everything in the house and beaten the carpets, which are now airing out on the clothesline, flapping in the breeze. Clay is around back, coating the piano – just about the only thing he owns that might be worth a penny – with a slick sheen of orange oil.

Little Clay safely inside, I walk around back, hoping to catch a glimpse of Clayton as he runs the old rag over the wood, knowing before I even turn the corner of the house that he'll be leaned down, his threadbare pants hitched up over his skinny hips, his arms showing through the sleeves of his worn undershirt (Lord does the man need new clothes; I couldn't mend 'em no more less they all just fell apart entirely, but he can't bear to spend no money on hisself) as he runs the oil over the wood. He told me once he'd had that piano since the day he got married (the first time); his first wife's Daddy had given it to him as a weddin' gift. It belonged to her Granny Laura, and her Mama Eugenia before her. Clay's father in law had told him it was even older than *that*, but he warn't sure how to find out just how old it was. Clay said his first wife had been worried when her Daddy gave the the piano Clay would balk – most grooms hope to have a bit of cash or some land for a weddin' present, even though they claim the idea of the dowry is dead, it for shore ain't – but he'd smiled a big old cat grin and said "what a lovely pianer that is, we'll treasure it all our days, won't we sweetheart", and his betrothed had been so happy. He told me that story over supper one night and I never had seen his face light up so; it made me feel a little in love with him. Never have seen that much joy in his face again, to tell the truth, 'cept for maybe the day Clay Jr. was born.

But I ain't jealous, not a bit. I don't begrudge his first wife the love he bears for her. From what I've heard in Clay's stories, I like her. And they had two fine children together, and a happy life. I think when Clay lost them - for his wife and both their children are now dead - he lost himself, too. If oilin' that piano helps him feel close to them, why, who am I to judge?

Besides, I love the piano, too. I been learnin' to play a little, here and there. I got "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" down pat for Little Clay.

Clayton brings the piano outside once a year – he built a ramp that he pushes it down ever so carefully, out into the yard where he can "get a good look at what I'm doing" – and he lovingly polishes that piano with oil and he tunes it, too. He told me that once, years ago, when things weren't so dear, he paid a piano teacher in town to show him how to tune it. He really did. Can you believe such?

Clay is just finishing up polishing as I come up behind him. I put my hands on his back and say, "Come on and eat, hon." I startle him, make him jump, but when he turns around he's smiling. He puts his own hands on my shoulders and we stand there in the heat for a minute, swaying back and forth like we're taking a turn at a country dance.

"I'm just finishing up, Miss Sivvy," he says with a smile, and places a gentle kiss on my cheek. He always calls me that, even though we're wed. I find it kinda funny. "What's on?"

"Nothin' to get worked up over," I said, hating to disappoint him. "But I did put some sweet potatoes in the fire for you."

"Why, them's my favorite!" He says with a wink, and my heart surges a little. He's a damn lie. Sweet potatoes ain't his favorite; squash is his favorite and those ain't making yet, if they do at all. The dirt is dry as a bone and the damned weevils are trying to get at anything with a stalk. But his smile is

sweet and I can't help but smile back. Clay is a dear, always a dear. Sometimes he's so nice it makes me mad, but I never could tell him that.

"I might have a bite of chicken, too." I say. "If you're nice to me."

"Fried chicken?"

I turn as I walked back to the house, and shot him a coy grin. "Just might."

"I'm right behind you, Miss Sivvy." He said, and I laugh as he makes like he's out to chase me.

Clay doesn't ask me if I seen anybody in the corner today, and I don't offer up that information. Some days, you just got to take happiness where you can get it, you see, and close your eyes to the other. Love is Blindness, they say, but won't they don't say is that it's often *willful* blindness.



*Late March 2020*

*Bullet Journal of LL*

*The bees are already out in full force. Carpenter bees; they literally eat you out of house and home. I don't want to hurt a single one, but finding an all natural remedy to repel them isn't going so well. According to the "woo woo" section of the internet, I can try almond oil, lavender oil, eucalyptus oil...pretty much any kind of oil, the smellier the better.*

*None of them work.*

*I've finally gotten to the point where I can lay down and sleep through the night without waking up coughing or wheezing, and I haven't used my inhaler in two days. That's progress! It scares me when I read about the symptoms of this mysterious illness that's still barely making headlines – I can't make heads or tails of it, because a lot of the symptoms – shortness of breath, wheezing, tightness in the chest – are things that I've been experiencing with this not-flu that I had, and yet a lot of the things folks are dying of seem so unrelated. Organ failure, and so on. All I can gather is that nobody really knows anything. I guess with a new illness that nobody has any experience with, you just have to wait for the science, the data, to catch up enough to start making some accurate assessments. Enough people have to have it for you to really study it.*

*To put it plain: more people have to die before we know anything.*

*"The Stand" has always been my most favorite Stephen King book. I've read almost all of his novels and that one has always been heads above the others. I've seen the miniseries from the 90s, the really cheesy one with Rob Lowe and Molly Ringwald, probably a dozen times. I can quote it, I remember the soundtrack (shout out to Crowded House, my guilty pleasure) and the clothes and that godawful mullet on Randall Flagg, the Walkin' Dude...and of course that now-iconic beginning sequence with the crow and BOC's "Don't Fear the Reaper"...one of my all-time favorite intros to any television show, ever.*

*I love that miniseries and I love the book so, so much...*

*...but with all due respect to Sai King, I never want to touch it again.*

*I had started to re-read it back in the Fall, but now it's back on the shelf. Where it will stay.*

*Sometimes things just get a little too real, and they stop being so entertaining.*



*April 1918*

*From the Diary of Sivvy Shelnutt*

*It was in the newspaper today that 38 patients died in a fire at the State Hospital in Oklahoma. Clay was reading the paper and I just happened to catch the headline over his shoulder.*

*Oklahoma is a long ways from here and I don't know nobody there, but I felt a chill go up my back and if I'm tellin' true, that chill is still there; it won't go away. It just climbs and climbs, rolls over my skin and makes me shiver.*

*I just kept thinking about that place. State Hospitals, they call 'em - Hospital, Asylum, Sanitarium - call it anything you like, but what they really are, is just a cage for the mad.*

*I cain't shake the thought. I just cain't shake it. Bein' stuck like that, one of the forgotten folks, stuck there till they "get well" when ain't nobody gonna get well, not ever. Abandoned and forgotten, left to your madness. That ain't no life, not at all.*

*As if it weren't bad enough to be locked away with only your own bad brain for company, to pass the days and months and years alone, with your rotted thoughts, not a body on earth to care for you. And then to die locked inside a cage, the fire melting your flesh, licking your bones.*

*I reckon I've written enough for today.*

*"They say this flu is more serious than we thought."*

*"Huh?" I snap back from my thoughts, my sewing forgotten on my lap. Clay is sitting on the couch, Clay Jr. asleep in his lap, the newspaper spread out before him. He puts the paper down and looks at me.*

*"The flu. You know how they been seein' cases long past the flu season is usually over? Well, now they're sayin' it's a different type of flu than we usually got, and they reckon it's deadlier."*

*"Oh." I shrug, then think the better of my apathy. "Well, that's not good at all. What they reckon we ought to do?"*

"They ain't really said yet." Clay says, and smiles. "Let's just praise the Good Lord that we live in a small town, and not in Atlanta like Janie Louise."

Jane Louise is Clay's older sister, his last remainin' relative, and she's a nurse in Atlanta. Clay reckons she hung the moon and the stars.

"Praise the Lord," I say, nodding, and we smile at each other across the room, our sleeping boy snoring lightly in Clay's arms.

Oh, you're smiling too, in the corner, but I don't see you. Nope, sure don't see a thing. Not nary a thing. I get up and walk over to the piano, dust off my skirt, and sit down to play. I'm learning "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows" for my boys, who love it so; it's not an easy song and I should be looking at my sheet music. But instead, I play it with my eyes squeezed shut.



*April 2020*

*Bullet Journal of LL*

*There's a Facebook group going around that everyone is joining, volunteering to make masks for local healthcare workers and those in need. I dug out my old sewing machine, some of my grandma's old fabric, and set to work. The results were laughable; I've never been very good at sewing. It's one of many things I enjoy but do not excel at. I don't have a steady hand, never have. It trembles a little and I hope people don't notice. I once read that Virgos are terrible with projects because we abandon them as soon as we realize we need practice. That's probably fair.*

*We've all gone into "social distancing"; it's been a month now, for those of us who took it seriously. Most of us, at least among my group of friends and family, are staying home. For those of us with the privilege of getting things delivered or grabbing groceries via pickup, we aren't leaving the house at all. The rest of us are on "essential trips" to work, for medicine and groceries only. I've left the house only once in two weeks, and that trip to Kroger took me two and a half hours – fifteen minutes of which was spent in the car, careful to get my mask on just so, sanitizing my hands, extracting my grocery list with shaking hands from my purse and walking into the store like someone on death row making their last walk. With every movement I felt I was being melodramatic while simultaneously trying not to have a panic attack. Trying to hurry through the store, only selecting items on my list, ended up taking me twice as long as a leisurely shopping trip in which I browsed and listlessly purchased "impulse buys" from the clearance aisle that I didn't need. The toilet paper aisle was a barren wasteland, the shelves totally empty except for three lone packages of "dude wipes" which aren't fooling anybody (they're just baby wipes with a cool logo) and a lackluster sign printed on white paper that says "LIMIT ONE ITEM"; a totally redundant sign since there's no one item to be had. The aisle is as silent as a tomb, as deserted as a ghost town, and yet people mill up and down it, pushing their buggies in shell-shocked silence, scanning the empty shelves as though peering into them will somehow make toilet paper materialize.*

*A few aisles down, I noticed the flour was gone, too. So was the sugar. And oddly, frozen fish sticks were nowhere to be found. But there was lots and lots of beer. Some enterprising employee had dragged an entire palette of Budweiser into the frozen pizza aisle, lazily ripping open the plastic shrinkwrap and leaving it to be pillaged.*

*Apparently I'm not the only one who is drinking a lot more these days.*

*After what felt like a lifetime, I made my way out of the store, clutching my purse in my hands, a purse which must've been teeming with germs, trying not to crawl out of my skin as I walked to the car at a fast pace, desperate for my bottle of antibacterial gel which has now become one of my prized possessions.*

*"Excuse me, young lady." I heard a gentle old southern voice behind me. I turned, wary, not wanting to be interrupted in my quest to get the hell home and into a shower to wash off the risk. But I'm nothing if not polite. So I turned, pasting on a smile, and saw an old man standing there.*

*He was a little stooped, with white hair peeking out of a blue cap, placed on his head like an afterthought. A matching Navy jacket showed the multiple patches and proud commendations of a veteran, and indeed, one of the patches said "VETERAN" in large block letters. His hands were stuffed in the pocket of his polyester slacks, either legit 70s or a grand replication of them. He smiled at me a little, but mainly he just looked pained, and very, very tired.*

*"Can I help ya, sir?" My inner southern belle always comes out at full force when I'm around old people. I blame my grandma.*

*"Well, no...yes..." he faltered a little and my heart clenched. "I just wondered where you got that there mask."*

*My hand flew to my face and I almost touched the damn thing! I stopped myself just in time. "Well, my husband brought it home from work...he's a heating and air guy, and they had a few at the shop." This was the truth, but I still felt guilty, as though I was lying. Because I knew it was unfair, you see, that I had one when so many didn't.*

*"Oh..." his face fell. "I was hoping they had 'em inside. I was hopin' you could tell me where they were." He shuffled toward the door, then turned back to me. "I don't mind so much, but my wife. She's real scared...she ain't left the house in weeks. She wants one of them masks real bad."*

*He moved to go on inside and I called out to him, my voice muffled behind the mask, "Sir, I do have a spare. My son's. If you want to walk to my car with me, I can get it for you. He's never used it. I'm happy to give it to you." Even as I said it, I was thinking ahead to how I'd get him another mask. But dammit, my kid is a hermit and I could keep him home and the old man needed it more.*

*For a split second, he was going to take it. I could see the look on his face; the desire to keep his wife safe, to come home with one of those damned masks that are so rare and hard to find they're like bars of gold; was going to override his gentlemanly upbringing, that toxic masculinity that taught men of his generation that accepting help made them weak; that southern pride, every lesson the greatest generation had ever taught about not taking help from strangers. He was going to take the mask. He inched toward me and moved as though he were going to follow me. "Well....." he began, and his mouth started to form the word "...yes."*

*And then he blinked, and his eyes were very sad, and he said, "That's alright. I can't put you out like that. I'm sure I'll find a mask at one of these stores." And he turned to go inside.*

*"Are you sure?" I called after him. "Because I don't mind."*

*"Yes'm, I thank ya. I'm sure."*

*I wanted to yell after him. To say, "STOP. COME BACK. YOU WON'T FIND A MASK ANYWHERE IN TOWN OR ANYWHERE ELSE. THERE'S NONE TO BE HAD. PLEASE TAKE MY MASK. PLEASE."*

*I wanted to say, "I'm afraid if you don't take my mask, you will die."*

*Instead I said nothing and watched the old man shuffle into Kroger, shoulders stooped yet proud, his white tufted hair moving a little in the breeze as he made his way through the sliding glass doors and into the store that definitely did not have one single fucking mask.*

*But they did have beer, at least.*

*I think about that man all the time. Almost every day.*

*I wonder if he's alive. If his wife is alive.*

*Because I know good and well he never found a mask.*



*September 1918*

*From the diary of Sivvy Shelnutt*

*I scarce have had time to write nothin' these past months. I've been sewing 'round the clock, sewin' up masks. I even got Little Clay and Big Clay to wear 'em, when we go out, which is purdy much never. We never was folks to go round town much, less'n we shoppin' for food or some such, and going to church on a Sundy. I'd just as soon miss Church if I had my druthers but Clay is the preacher, so naturally he cain't miss Church. But we mask up for sermon, hoping that folks in the congregation will follow our example (half do and half don't, Lord is folks frustrating), we've got our three little masks hangin' on the door by a peg, just in case some travelin' salsesman or kin show up to say how'do. I ain't takin' no chances.*

*There's folks up the way, our neighbors, that reckon it's all overblown nonsense from Washington, drummed up scandal and pretense to distract us from the War, but I don't figure on that. Some folks'll blame any ol' thing atall on "the folks up in Washington" and while I reckon they're all as crookit as*

*broke back (what politician ain't? It's a job requirement just about), some things just ain't made up no matter how you look at 'em.*

*This is one of those things. That dummy busybody Tella Gowe from Church can crow about lies and made-up stories all she wants to, but she ain't tended nobody dyin' of the flu.*

*I have.*

*Clay ain't been the same sense. No, he sure hasn't. And I can scarce blame the man. It ain't every day you lose your sister like that. She was the only family he had left, save for me and Little Clay.*

*It's got next to him. He ain't been right since, and it's been a month already. I don't know if he'll ever be right again.*

*I'm suppost to be the crazy one in this family, but lately I've had to straighten up. For my man, see. Cause he's drownin'.*

She's been gone only a week, and her letter is still tacked up on the wall, beside the desk, where Clay had first put it when it arrived.

It had been a short letter, distraught, full of none of the usual flowery speech and purple prose that Janie Louise Shelnutt was normally prone to.

I'd always liked Clay's sister, his only living relative. I'd only met her a couple of times, but I liked her. Not just because she was Clay Jr.'s aunt and my sister in law and I had to, but because I genuinely liked her. She was a kind woman, very sweet, with a large, beaming smile that transformed her whole face. She had the most beautiful curling blonde hair, the kind women envied because it didn't come from rollers; it was natural. She was a natural beauty, even at her advanced age, fresh faced and glowing with an inner light that you just knew came from a good heart.

Despite all that goodness and beauty, Janie Louise was a strong woman who took care of herself. On account of that, folks in town had judged her and basically run her out on a rail. She didn't need no man to care for her; Janie Louise took care of herself. But folks is sure strange about old maids, ain't they?

Clay said his sister had gone into nursing when she was only fifteen or so, desperate to learn "how to heal folks", after the death of her and Clay's parents, who had both died when they were teenagers, due to an outbreak of Scarlet Fever in their small town. The way Clay talked of it, his sainted sister had not only taken care of him (he'd only been 13 when they died) but she'd immediately started training to be a nurse so she could take care of other folks who suffered the same fate. She'd seen them so ill, Clay had told me, and Janie Louise had felt so helpless, so ill equipped. The two of them had been forced to watch their parents die knowing they could do nothing. Janie Louise had never wanted to feel that way again. So she learned how to heal folks. I admire that, I really do; turning your grief into somethin' useful.

I stare at her letter now, an icy draft from the window fluttering it and pressing it against the wall. Clay left the window open and the cold is slithering its way into the house. I beat back the tears against my eyelids and shut the window, harder than is necessary. Without thinking further, I rip the

letter from the wall, fold it up and stick it inside the rollaway desk. I'd never throw it out, but Clay doesn't need to be confronted with the sight of it every day. Nor do I.

Besides, we both have the letter memorized by now.

*Dearest brother Clayton, and Savilia, and dear little Clayton Jr.,*

*I hope you will extend to me your hospitality and allow me to stay with you for a spell. As much as I love Atlanta, I need to be home amongst family and in the bosom of those who love me.*

*Stanford has died.*

*Of the flu.*

*I cannot write more; it is too hard. I will talk more of this when I arrive, if I can. I hope you will take pity on me and allow me to stay. I need my family right now, what I have left of one. If you have no objection, Clay, will you please come pick me up at the train station? I will await your telegram with details of date, time etc.*

*Your loving sister,*

*Janie Louise Shelnutt*

I remember the first time Janie Louise had written home about her beau. We'd all been so overjoyed, Clay especially. I didn't know Janie Louise's exact age; it's not polite to ask such. But I knew she was at least a year or two older than her brother, and Clay is in his sixties. The thought of her finally having someone, a prospect, or even just someone to spend time with at her age, had us thrilled to pieces. A "career woman", Clay called her - Janie Louise had worked all the way through her marriage and childbearing years without anyone to warm her bed at night or give her his name. Clayton had told me that one of the reasons she'd hightailed it to Atlanta as soon as she could was because she couldn't stand folks looks - they'd looked at her with pity in their eyes or judgement, one.

I never had - I knew that beneath her sweet smile and shining, curling hair, Janie Louise Brown was tough as nails and had a spine of steel. You could just see it in her; she suffered no fools and she knew her own mind and heart. Oh, how I envied her and that easy confidence that seemed to come so naturally to her. When she wrote to us that she'd met a widower named Stanford Garrison with no children, who had taken her out for a root beer, I'd praised the Lord - not because I'd worried about Janie Louise being an old maid, but because she was a dear heart who deserved happiness and love. I knew she'd make any man a fine, happy wife, if that's what she wanted.

Stanford Garrison worked at the hospital, Janie Louise told us in her letters. That was where they had met. He was not a doctor, but a janitor. It was back breaking work and he was a good man, she said. They didn't get much time to see each other because there were so many flu cases and they were both run off their feet. But they were courting and happy as a lark. Every night I'd bend down to say my prayers and I'd include an extra one for Mr. Stanford Garrison, who I had not met, but who I knew, from Janie's letters, had dark brown hair with threads of gray, and dark brown eyes and loved pinochle and homemade cornbread. I hoped to serve him some one day. I prayed that they would both come through this outbreak safely, so he and Janie Louise could be married. She wrote to say that, if all was well, she'd

bring Stanford home at Christmas, and both Clay and I were over the moon to hear it. A new member of our small family, what a joyous occasion!

And then he had died. Just like that.

Janie Louise had not elaborated in her letter, but we understood well enough. We'd read the newspaper headlines; we knew what things were like in the city. The flu had started springing up all over the military barracks, and then it had hit the ports, and the capital cities, and it spread like wildfire. Janie Louise did not need to give us the details; we knew. Stanford Garrison, cleaning up the muck and trash from the hospital, overrun with flu patients, had simply caught it - it was inevitable really. And he had died, like so many others. That was that, and for many, he was just another older gentleman, another widower, another janitor. Another dead person.

And so Janie Louise came home to us. Clay had gone to pick her up from the train station in Atlanta, Peachtree station. It was only built a few months ago and he'd never seen it. Normally he would have been excited for such a trip, but he was somber that day. I longed to go with him, but decided it would be best to stay home with Little Clay. There wasn't room for all four of us to sit comfortably for a two hour ride in Clayton's beat up old truck. Besides, I thought the two of them might need a bit of time alone.

When they arrived at the house, I was aghast. I'd expected Janie Louise to be grief stricken - anyone would be - and she was. But beyond the pallor of grief, beyond the swollen eyes from the tears she'd shed, there was something else. Janie Louise was clammy, and her hand, when she pressed it into mine, was hot.

"You feelin' alright, hon?" I'd asked her in a low voice, aware of the fact that she was much older than me and I was speaking above my station. But she just looked so *bad*. She was clearly beyond the realm of heartbreak as it was. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her usually bright, glowing face, pale and distraught. Her hair, normally shining and curled, was damp and falling out of her braid.

"I do feel a touch of something," she'd said absently, and my eyes had widened in alarm. She seemed to notice nothing, to think it nothing at all. "I just assumed it was my heart breaking."

Clay whispered to trouble her no more, that we should get her to bed. His eyes flickered with irritation; he worshipped his older sister and I suppose he thought I was being a pest, or being rude, by bringing attention to how badly she looked. He is a protective man. But the fevered look in her eye, and the hot flush of her skin, worried me greatly. We spirited her off to the guest room where we offered her every comfort, and she went to sleep without so much as another word. She didn't even ask for Little Clay, who she adored, which at the time shocked and saddened me.

Now I am glad she did not. It might have been his saving grace.

It hit her awful fast. By the next morn, she was ailin' already. Truth told, she was ailin' before she stepped foot in our front door, and I knew it when I clapped eyes on her. It took her fast, too. I reckon I know why that is - she'd lost her will to fight, after losin' Stanford.

I did my best to tend her - her being a nurse an' all, she would croak out things to me in her weak little voice, things I ought to do for her, and I did 'em as best as I could. Cold compresses, water and broth, all the things you do. Her fever raged on and on, though, no matter what we did to break it.

Clay brought in washtub after washtub of cold water and by the end we just pulled off her shift, for modesty no longer meant a thing, and threw her into the icy cold, but it was all for naught.

In the span of four days she only emerged from the sickbed to go to the outhouse, where she'd holler and moan and come back inside, green at the gills. She drank water a little, only to throw it up again or for it to come out the other.

Four days. That was all it took.

And Janie Louise was gone.

My Clay hasn't been the same since. Losin' all his family the way he done, then to lose his older sister, who he saw as a saint. It was too much for him. Just too much. He hasn't said much about it since, and he was never much for words nohow, but the haunted look in his eyes tells me all I need to know. He roused himself for the funeral, which was of course at his church, and he gave a good sermon and eulogy. Janie Louise was buried there in the family plot, all by her lonesome; no partner to lay beside her.

Life is so unfair.

You understand, don't ya? You in the corner with your damned ugly face. Oh I know, I pretend I don't see you, but today I'm just so *tired*, too tired to pretend. I see you staring back at me with your big ugly eyes and that hint of a smile on your lips, see the way you open your mouth and make like you're going to talk to me, and then you don't say a word.

I don't need to hear from you, anyhow. I've other voices that talk to me, voices that come from near and far, inside my head and away in the clouds. So many that sometimes I can't drown 'em out, and I talk back to 'em.

Tired as I am, I've got to keep 'em at bay. I've got to try and stay well, for my boy, and for my Clay. Nobody can take much more, least of all them.

And so I sew. Every day, I sew more masks. Once a week I take them into town and drop them off, just in case a body needs one. Every woman in town is sewing masks; we probably got twenty for every person in the place, but we keep on sewing, because there's nothing else for us to do.

Sew and wait and hope we don't die.

Shoo, fly. Shoo.



May 2020

Bullet Journal LL

*The grocery store has been sold out of tofu for two straight months. It's not that huge of a deal – I only make my favorite Grit-style tofu a couple of times a month – but it bothers me and I can't explain why. I keep wondering why on earth of all the things, tofu would be sold out. It's not like people are making a mad dash to buy the stuff, like toilet paper or flour. I keep wondering despite myself if it's for some racist reason that tofu has been sold out of Kroger for two months and hoping I'm wrong.*

*I've never been much of a drinker. I drink socially; the odd cocktail or cider when friends are over or at a cookout. Sometimes I'll join my husband for a jam session and have a glass of wine or two. It's never really been my thing and I don't have an addictive personality.*

*But since all this started, I've taken to drinking almost every day. Nothing major – I'm not developing a problem – but just a beer or a glass of wine or a cocktail before dinner every day, out on the porch in my little corner of rural solitude. I sit in my rocking chair and sip my drink and more often than not, I play music. It's just a little sliver of relaxation that helps ease some of the stress. I never used to "get" people who would say things like, "I look forward to my beer at the end of the day", or friends who would talk about pouring a glass of wine the moment they stepped in the door after work. But now I get it. It's just a ritual, something to look forward to, a way to manage the chaos.*

*I think this means I'm old.*

*I was so proud that I'd gone two months without a single sip of Starbucks. All the money I'd manage to save while in isolation.*

*Now I'm just spending it on booze.*

*I'm still staying off Twitter at night. The daily update counts have gotten to be a source of misery; I only check them sporadically and I try not to read too many comments that border on hysteria or frenzy. It isn't that I'm trying to pretend everything is fine, because it isn't, of course it isn't. There's no pretending it isn't. But to live any sort of manageable existence I have to tune out the numbers after a while. I hate to mute the hysterical screaming for my peers who post paragraphs-long status updates multiple times a day telling me what I already know. Daily updates where I watch the death count tick ever and ever higher as our government does nothing is too much, it's just too much. Every day a new symptom, a new complication related to this illness that they know nothing about. The research they do is useless, apparently – for every headline that comes out, it's debunked two days later. We don't know why the illness attacks the way it does, who it will attack or where. Who will recover and who won't. Who is asymptomatic.*

*Who is doomed and who will prevail.*

*It's one thing when you know what to expect. You can eventually accept any horrible thing on a large scale as long as you know it's coming. But when you don't know for sure what's coming at all, how do you prepare? Any one of us could be next.*

*The husband and I have done more yardwork in the past few weeks than we've ever done together in the entirety of our relationship. I've planted flowers and vegetables and fruit trees. I've moved stones and picked up branches and weed-wacked the entirety of our land. We work up a sweat and then we sit on the porch and drink beer and listen to Queens of the Stone Age, and try to melt into the slats of our wooden rocking chairs.*

*I've enjoyed this time of isolation, and I feel guilty for that. I see my friends complain about going stir-crazy and I chuckle inwardly because they haven't a clue; we're only at the beginning. And I wonder why it is that I haven't started to lose my mind yet. I'm okay with the solitude. I realized how much forced-socialization I was putting myself through. Spending time with people I didn't really need to spend time with; running errands that didn't need running, staying in the road, wasting time, precious time.*

*I'm glad to have some time back. To have moments where I can sit on the porch and melt into the furniture.*

*But it's taken death on a mass scale to bring that peace, that solitude, and well, that just doesn't sit right.*

*Eventually the silence will feel too much like guilt, and then we'll have to riot.*



*October 1918*

*From the diary of Sivvy Shelnutt*

*Clay come down with a fever tonight.*

*We was so careful after Janie Louise. I scrubbed the house with bleach a dozen times, if it was one. We wear our masks to church every Sunday.*

*And he still caught it.*

*I'm awful scared. Clay is old and he's weak and he ain't been right since he lost her.*

*I'm tending him as best I can, but he's stubborn as the dickens and don't want me to do much. Says he'll just "sleep it off". Why are men so bullheaded when they're sick? His sister just died of the flu and he's gonna "sleep it off?" I've been tempted to send Little Clay to Rob and Miriam Gum's, to keep him safe, but then I'm risking getting them sick, if he has it.*

*Please God don't let him have it.*

*Poor Marla's been through enough, so I can't ask her, either. Her boy Etheldred - it pains me to even write the words - he didn't make it back home from the War. He's buried somewhere in Europe in an unmarked grave, I reckon. Just a baby, like. Barely twenty years old.*

*At least he didn't die shittin' and screamin' from this damned flu, if that's any cold comfort at all.*

*Lord, let my Clay be spared that misery, that pain. Spare my little boy, too.*

*It's hard to know what to do. I feel like I'm making a wrong choice no matter which way I turn.*

*I just hope I don't come down with nothin'. Who will take care of the house, this family, if I'm gone?*

*I almost laughed at my own self. Like I'm fit to take care of anybody, mad as I am. That's funny, ain't it.*

The house is deadly silent, except for the odd cough in the next room. With every one I hear, I wake up, laying there for a minute, my own breathing labored and becoming more shallow as I adjust to being awakened so often. Every time I wake up it's in a panic; my airways feeling constricted, my heart beating so fast that for a brief moment, I wonder if perhaps I've succumbed to the illness, too.

I'll wait a minute and see if he coughs again. Sometimes, he'll settle, then fall back into his fitful sleep. But if it persists, I'll get up, rub at my eyes and go into the room to where my Clay is laying under the thin sheet, his skin drenched with clammy sweat, and press a hand to his forehead. Push his gray hair back from his eyes. My hand always comes away damp and sticky. His fever never seems to go down; he's always hot. Always burning up.

I've tried cold compresses and cool baths and broths and water and all the things you're supposed to try; I've given him white lightning to ease the cough and sorghum syrup in place of honey to try and extinguish the fire in his throat. But he just coughs and coughs. He says there's pins in his throat and I can't do nothing for that. I don't know what to do.

And now Janie Louise is back.

She showed up a couple days ago, and I gave a hell of a start. I was pulling hoe cakes out of the fire, and I turned, and there in corner where *you* usually are, Shoofly, there was precious, sweet smiling Janie Louise.

I like to have a heart attack.

She put a finger to her lips as though to say "shhhh", or "calm down", I don't know which, but it didn't matter because I hadn't said nary a peep. I did almost drop the hoe cakes, and gave myself a frightful burn on my wrist – it would leave a scar – but I hadn't uttered a single sound, for which I was glad. Clay was asleep; he needed his rest.

"What do you want, woman?" I asked in a whisper, my voice a deep hiss, like a snake. I sounded meaner than I meant to, but she'd given me a frightful scare. What in the dickens was she doing here, in my kitchen? What was she doing with the likes of *you*?

For oh yes, you were there, too. Hovering behind like the spectre of damnation you are. Hovering and grinning and sucking all the air out of the room; when you are here, there's no light. No air. It's like I'm standing in a tunnel, drowning without benefit of water; drowning from the inside.

Tell the truth, that's what worried me - not that it was *her*, beloved Janie Louise, but rather that she was with *you*. You're what they call a booger, a haint - you're the stuff of my nightmares. But for someone I love, someone who was sweet and kind and all the good things in the world - to be with the likes of you, well, what does that mean?

That what I been seein' was real all this time? I'd just barely begun to convince myself that you was a figment of my imagination, something I conjured up all on my own. If she's here, though...Lord have mercy, I'm seein' ghosts.

Could it mean I'm 'bout to die, or Clay is, and Janie Louise is here to beckon us on home?

I shake so hard with the fright of it my dang teeth rattle.



*May 2020*

*Bullet Journal of LL*

*I bought a New York Times - probably the only time I've ever bought that newspaper in my life. It's a thick, heavy tome of a paper, as big as an old-school yellow pages phone book, and it cost me almost seven dollars.*

*The headline, in the NYT's signature font, looming and large, reads:*

***U.S. DEATHS NEAR 100,000, AN INCALCULABLE LOSS***

*This newspaper, both in print and part of a larger interactive project online, is to commemorate the over 100,000 lives lost in the United States to the coronavirus so far. The front page is littered with hundreds of names with a blurb for each one; some poor journalist or editor saddled with the impossible task of summing up an entire life in two lines or less. I bought the paper because I couldn't not; it felt like the right thing to do.*

*I scanned over the names. I took a close-up picture of a few of them, texted them to my mom. I posted the front page on Instagram. It all feels hollow and performative. That's the world we live in now. Even the most sincere and genuine of acts feel fake because we always have an audience.*

*I read in an article that claimed "performative actions are actually good for your mental health". That seems like what they call "fake news", but what do I know? All I know is that Facebook farms lies for ad revenue and Twitter is like hotboxing pure, uncut outrage; Instagram is full of influencers and friends from high school who only share the highlight reel of their lives and make all of us feel bad.*

*Yet I - we - keep on scrollin'.*

*If a life is lost and nobody posts on Instagram, does it make a sound?*

*TikTok is cool but I'm too old. I'm in my thirties and past my sell-by date even though I firmly believe that these kids are the future and I'll fight anybody who mis-labels them Millennials and suggest they're what's wrong with the world. A friend of mine said something like, "Kids these days are so weak. They want a cry room at their shitty McDonalds job so they can whine about how they don't make enough money for their ironic protest tees!"*

*I wanted to be like, "Damn, who hurt you?"*

*Instead I sipped my coffee.*

*All of a sudden there are masks everywhere. It's ironic. I bought a cheap black one at the same Kroger where I bought the newspaper. I only make one trip a week - I can never get a spot less than a week out on Clicklist no matter how I try - and I feel damn guilty about that. Legitimately guilty like I'm killing people every time I get my groceries. I slather myself in sanitizer, I wear my mask, I get through the store as fast as I can without getting near anyone, I wait my turn to go down narrow aisles, I don't touch merchandise I don't plan to buy. I smile at everyone I pass even though I know they can't see me beneath the mask - I hope they can see my eyes crinkle. As soon as I'm done I put away my items and sanitize myself again and drive home with purpose, spraying lysol on all my groceries before I put them away. Then I throw away all the bags. Then I sanitize the counters. Then I take a shower and change my entire outfit, throwing the old one into the washing machine as soon as I'm done. I lysol my shoes.*

*I feel like all these precautions are fucking pointless but I do them anyway to give myself some semblance of control and to feel like at least I'm trying, even if nobody else is.*

*They're opening everything back up already. We never flattened the curve to begin with; the numbers are still surging, and it takes forever to get a test, if you can even find one. The hospitals are overflowing, the nurses and doctors are exhausted, and people are dying by the thousands.*

*I should get an antibody test, at least. But the only place I can find in town that has them wants you to pay out of pocket for the privilege. I asked the urgent care receptionist over the phone, innocently, why the COVID tests were not free everywhere. "We've always charged and we'll always charge and that's just the way it is, no matter how many people ask," she said, and her voice was so full of bitterness and exhaustion that I couldn't even drum up my inner Karen to snap back at her.*

*But hey, let's rip off those masks and head to the beach, amirite?*

*I need a haircut so bad. I'm so resentful that I can't even get my hair cut. And then I feel guilty for being resentful over something so trivial. And then I feel mad that I have to feel guilty because of the actions of others.*

*And on and on it goes.*

*The mask slips, and our true selves become exposed.*



*Late November 1918*

*From the diary of Sivvy Shelnutt*

*Clay is so weak he cain't get out of bed without holdin' onto someone's arm, but he's gettin' up at least.*

*There were times when I thought he warn't going to make it; that he was on his last breath. He'd inhale, then his throat would seem to clench and hitch up and he'd sputter and cough and his face ain't never been such an odd shade of blue - so blue it went into gray and almost came out green on the other side - and I'd hold my own breath until my chest was like to burst until he'd finally exhale and breathe in again, set to live another moment. And each moment collected and built on the one before until those moments had passed enough for me to believe he might just live.*

*But he ain't the same. He's alive but he ain't, really.*

*I reckon when he lost his wife, and then his youngins, a part of Clay shriveled up and died. Maybe that part came back, for a time, when I showed up and Little Clay was born. But I think whatever darkness claims him from time to time, it's back, and it's on him.*

*My Mama used to be friends with a woman by the name of Dorthy. She lived by herself on the ridge and she didn't talk atall. Never heard her say nary a peep. I heard folks whisper that she had been committed once years ago, because she couldn't get over the death of her family. Her husband and two of her youngins had died of Scarlet Fever all in the span of a week and she'd gone mad with grief. They said she'd laid down in the floor and just screamed and screamed until her voice had left her, and it just never come back. Her folks ain't had no choice but to her commit her. Back then, I didn't know what "committed" meant but now I know it means to be locked up like them poor dead souls in the Oklahoma State Hospital.*

*We got one of those in Milledgeville, too, but I don't like to think on it. It's too close for comfort and it makes my skin prickle. But I reckon that's where Dorthy ended up.*

*Folks on the ridge whispered that Dorthy didn't talk the whole time she was in there, in the asylum. Nor did she talk when she got home to the ridge, either, not to my hearing, anyhow. Dorthy was clammed up like a seashell, and I half-figured more was gone of her than just her voice. Some folks like my Mama tried to coax her out and get her to say a piece, but she sure nuff wouldn't do it. She'd just stand up and walk off if you bothered her too much.*

*Tell the truth, I always kinda admired that in her. She didn't think nothin' atall of gettin' up and walking out of the room without so much as a head nod if somebody got to talkin' mess she didn't like. Imagine if everybody in the world did that. Why, a lot of folks would stop spewin' so much hot air, wouldn't they just?*

*I knew grief, but I never understood not talkin'...to have nothing at all to say. Me, I'd want to talk, to fill the silence so I couldn't hear my own thoughts, or hear the pity in everybody's voices. One thing I notice*

*about folks: even genuine pity sounds fake, somehow. Because pity ain't the same thing as understandin', you see. I'd talk and talk and talk so as not to hear nobody.*

*But not her. Not Dorthy. Her words just dried up and died.*

*My Clay ain't said more than two or three words together this week past.*

"Shoo." I whisper hotly in the kitchen, a cup of sassafras tea going cold on the table. "Shoo, fly."

I pick up the newspaper and swat at the air. A fly - a real one - has been buzzing around the kitchen all afternoon, itchin' to get his beady little body, his pinching little mouth, on my spice cake. I made it special for Clay and Little Clay. They're both too skinny by a mile and Big Clay won't eat nary a bite. If he loses another pound he'll be a mess of skin and bones. He needs to get his strength back, but he don't seem to care at all.

I reckon he wishes he'd died.

I know he aches for his big sister, but how is that supposed to make me feel? And Little Clay? His only boy. Why wouldn't he want to stay alive for us?

The front page of the newspaper glares at me as I fold it back up and put it on the table, the damned fly still buzzing around, teasing me, coming as close as it can to the cake without actually touching it. The headlines get worse and worse every day. This latest one, well, it takes the cake. I chuckle dry in my throat; I made a joke.

The Headline: ***Spanish "Flu" is officially a PANDEMIC, doctors say as thousands more sicken and DIE***

I ain't got much book learnin', and I can barely write, but it seems to me that you don't need to capitalize or bold a word like DIE. It's bad enough, ain't it, on its own? But what do I know.

Marla over the road's got it now; she's been sick for a long spell. Weeks. They reckon she caught it off somebody at her boy Etheldred's funeral. I cain't scarce believe the cruelty of it all, how unfair life is. To catch something at your own son's funeral that's gonna kill you. And it will; Marla's fairing real poor. She won't let the doc see her and she ain't even tryin' to eat or drink nothing. The fight's all gone out of her. It went with her boy. She's let Miriam Gum tend her some, and Miriam gives me updates over the fence when we see each other outside, but I don't get too close. Miriam says it won't be long now; Marla's done gave up.

I reckon if I'd lost my baby, I'd give up, too.

I been feeling so guilty about us not going to Etheldred's funeral. But now that I know Marla's caught the damned flu I'm a sight relieved, if you want to know the truth. For all we know a body can catch it again, after you done had it. And I cain't risk my Clay getting sick again, when he barely made it out of death's door to begin with. Nor do I want me or my Little Clay to catch nothin'. It's only to luck that we didn't catch it from *you*.

Yes, you, Ms. Janie Louise. I see you there in the corner, smilin' pretty as you please. You always did have such a pretty smile, and such glowin' cheeks and that beautiful hair. I see you there plain as

day. You ain't left since my Clay took to his bed. You stand there with *him* and y'all just watch me. Are you watching to see if I crack up? Waitin' to take one of us away to the promised land?

Well it won't be today, no ma'am. You sure are pretty but I know when the devil is hidin' in plain sight and pretty or not, you might not be the real Janie Louise. And I wouldn't do a *thing* that would risk Little Clay bein' alone in this world, no sirree. So you can just get on back, you devil. I'm going to give my Clay a slice of cake and a cup of tea and he's going to be right as rain in due time. I say my prayers and the Lord will provide.

So you just shoo, fly. Shoo on down the road and don't never come back.



*June 2020*

*Bullet Journal of LL*

*They opened things back up a couple of weeks ago. God forbid anybody have to spend their memorial day grilling their cheap hot dogs and chicken thighs alone with only their immediate family for company. I keep seeing people say things online about how they can't wait to send their kids back to school and I wonder why we all have so many kids if we hate them so much.*

*I mean, I know the answer. The question is rhetorical.*

*We never even saw the first wave subside, not really. It hadn't really even peaked before our governor was announcing it was "over"; oh no, not the sickness, but rather, the response to it.*

*He said a lot of meaningless words, but it all boiled down to, "We're bored, we tried, oh well."*

*Capitalism is the winner on the day.*

*I was on one of my stressful Kroger trips when I noticed a man on one of those motorized carts, trying to navigate the narrow aisles, do his shopping and stay six feet away from everyone. I could see the stress in his face every time I passed him; the dirty looks people were giving him, the way people stared. In the candy aisle, I passed an older lady and a little girl, looking at boxes of Rainbow Nerds. "Don't you want a pack of these, honey?" The woman said to the little girl, her smile bright. I've loved Nerds since I was little myself. So I grabbed a box, smiled brightly at them, and said, "I know I sure do!" The woman looked up at me, the smile dying on her face as she noticed my mask. She glared at me, grabbed the little girl's arm, and stalked off.*

*A couple of aisles later, I walked by the guy on the motorized cart again. I saw his eyes flit over my face, and he opened his mouth to speak. I braced myself for the next onslaught of meanness that seems to live poised on people's lips these days. But instead, he exclaimed in a bright voice, "I just love your glasses! I had to tell you!" My hand flew to my head - oh - I was wearing my rainbow glasses. For Pride.*

*I felt my eyes fill with tears. I'd been so ready for him to be a jerk. I was ready to pull off those glasses and give them to him. If there'd been a way to sanitize them, I would have. I muttered thanks and walked away before he could see my embarrassment, my reaction to minor human kindness.*

*It's the ones who know what the dark is like that are always chasing rainbows, and trying to get the rest of us to see them, too.*

*I went yesterday and had the dreaded COVID test.*

*I started having shortness of breath and weird muscle cramps in my chest. I felt tired. I kept telling myself that my asthma has been bad this year, and part of the reason for that is the weird illness I had in January. I've had strange chest pains, shortness of breath and asthma symptoms ever since; and that's unusual for me. My asthma is normally so mild I never even need an inhaler. I used to wonder if I'd outgrown it.*

*I told myself "you've already had this, remember how sick you were in January. No matter how many people roll their eyes, insist that it wasn't here yet, you've already had it, and that means you can't have it now. You're ok. You're ok. You're ok."*

*Didn't work. Because I don't really know that, do I? And I couldn't breathe and the more I panicked the less I could breathe, so finally I caved. I spent a whole day frantically calling around, trying to schedule a test locally that wouldn't cost me over a hundred bucks or see me spending eight hours in line (because I still have to work and I have a kid and life doesn't stop for a pandemic, apparently, thanks guys). I call two local numbers, one via the health department. After the screening they tell me that tests are backed up and I can get one in three days. After the test, I'll wait another 7-11 days for my results. I'm incredulous, but a kind woman tells me that if I'm uninsured, that's my only option, so I reluctantly take the appointment.*

*And wait. I use my inhaler and ignore the pain in my chest - not daring to take ibuprofen because that's one of the hundreds of rumored things that makes the illness worse - and wait.*

*One hour before I leave for my appointment, I get a call. "It's supposed to rain this afternoon," a woman tells me. "So they've cancelled your appointment. They can see you in two days, if you'd like to reschedule."*

*I've already waited three. Why can't they test if it's raining? I reschedule the appointment but inside I'm screaming.*

*For the next two hours I hover over my phone and frantically tap keys and call number after number and finally manage to worm my way into a free CVS appointment for that afternoon; the last one of the day. It's a self-administered test and isn't as "official" as the painful brain-scraping test everyone talks about. I won't know results for at least two days. But I'm just grateful that I can get one and I don't have to pay for it.*

*It came back negative.*

*I feel no relief, nor do I feel disappointment (someone told me recently, 'half the people on Facebook talk like they want to have it', and that seems true, though the reasons for that is a whole conversation I don't have the energy for right now). I just feel numb.*

*Less than a month later there will be a week-long wait just to get the same test I got.*

*I imagine that a month after that it'll be a month-long wait.*

*Eventually there will be scores of people who die of Covid-19 while waiting to get tested for it.*

*I'm not a psychic; some things are just obvious.*

*We are broken.*



*December 1918*

*From the Diary of Sivvy Shelnutt*

*Folks who seem to know things keep sayin' "We're finally back to normal", but what's normal?*

*Was that war we sent our boys to, across the sea, boys barely old enough to court a gal or drink a brew - was that normal?*

*Was it normal that none of us have had a good crop or enough to fill our bellies for years now? That it gets worse every year and along with the flu, we got to contend with the pellagra besides? Is that normal?*

*Is it normal to go to church and sit in the cool, wooden pews and pray with your eyes clamped shut that those who have passed - feverish and retchin', guts gripin' in their beds - didn't know what they suffered towards the end? Is that normal?*

*Clay's well enough to be back at church now, and he says a lot of verses on grief and healin' and bless his heart, he's been tryin' to be the balm on our sore, jagged hearts. I reckon it's workin' for some. Not me. I cut my eyes over to Marla's last remainin' fambly, her nieces - two gals, who now ain't got no fambly at all to tend for 'em. They ain't got a body to look out for 'em, to see 'em make a good marriage, or nothin'. They're only 12 and 13, and the on'y two options is to get marrit and quick, or to go with the state. Where they'll end up in an orphanage, or worse, Milledgeville.*

*I lay awake nights, wonderin' what'll become of them gals.*

*I'd be put in the asylum for sure if anybody knew what was on my heart. Because the truth is there ain't a scripture in that Holy Book entire that will soothe my heart or make me forgive the Lord for what he done to us all. The Book of Psalms says the Good Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves them what are crushed in spirit.*

*Well, he sure ain't saved me.*

*And Clay might preach a good sermon but he still comes home every day and goes straight back to bed to stare at the wall, so where's God to comfort him?*

*I still pray; it's burned into my bones, prayer. All us good southern gals do our nightly prayers. I just know it ain't gonna do a lick of good.*

"Mama, can I go play?"

I pull the pin out of my mouth and pause from my sewing. "I reckon, but supper's in an hour so you best not muss up them clothes. Stay just in the front yard, hear?"

"Yes'm."

"I mean it, Clay Jr., don't you come in knee-deep in mud, neither. You keep them coveralls clean. I just washed 'em yest-dy."

"Yes'm." My son's voice has already taken on a note of annoyance, the kind you expect from a teenager, and he's barely three. Everything he says to me is in a certain tone, one you know he's developed just to express his frustration with his overbearin' Mama. I suppose I understand that but it don't mean I can help myself.

I open my mouth to call out to him, to tell him to have fun, but to be careful, but I cut myself off. Clay says I'm bein' a mother hen lately, and he's right. The boy is startin' to grow up - he ain't a baby no more - and he don't need my constant frettin' over him, giving him nervous fits. I got to learn to be less anxious.

Little Clay's already out the door anyway, the screen slammin' shut behind him. I can almost see the trail of dust moving up the driveway from where he's runnin' fast as his bare feet can take him to say how do to Miriam Gum at the gate; she's got on her mask and holding a covered basket. No doubt her husband Rob has sent us something delicious; bless his raunchy heart. That man tells the most scandalous jokes and cusses like a sailor but he sure can cook.

Sometimes I think without our friends and neighbors we would have long ago fallen apart. Me, Little Clay and Big Clay too, though he wouldn't admit to such. He ain't never had much time for friends; unless you count his congregation, and he only visits with the Gums because we do. I reckon he just passes the time with them for me and Little Clay, on account of us likin' that family so much. He and Rob Gum ain't got a thing in common. If it were up to Clay he'd pass the time alone. He ain't uppity or mean or nothin' - folks like him fine, love him in fact; he's done so much for people around here - but he's just so serious, so quiet. He ain't the type to go throw around a football or drink a beer or light up a cigar while chawing the fat. He don't get out and say how-do when he passes folks on the road. He lifts a finger and keeps on goin'. He don't mean to be un-neighborly and he's always here for a body that needs him; it's just his way.

The only friend my Clay ever had, to hear him tell it, was his sister Jane Louise. Sometimes I get to thinking on just why Clay did marry me. It had to have been a selfless, Christian act on his part because - other than our beloved little boy, who he adores - I don't reckon he's glad of our marriage at all.

That ain't to say he's unhappy, or that he doesn't love me in his own way. Only that he doesn't mind being alone. Not only does the solitude suit him fine, he prefers it, I reckon. I guess that's good...just in case I ain't always here.

A chill creeps up my back. I shake my head, a tendril of my dark hair falling out of my bobby pin. It's sweaty on the nape of my neck. It's warm for November, and the humidity outside has not abated, despite Thanksgiving approaching. It feels like this entire year has been hot. Perhaps that's why we're all so sick. Heat, humidity...sickness seems to relish in it.

I move to get up and go say hello to Miriam, but I can see from the window that she's already gone on down the road, likely to deliver more delicious food to our other neighbors. That couple stays doin' too much for folks.

"Clay?" I call out from the sewing table, knowing he can hear me from where he is. He's propped up in bed, restin' on pillows, reading the newspaper. He's been there since late mornin', and he's had to have read that paper goin' on three times if he's read it once. I know he ain't really readin' it no more - he's just staring at the wall, same as he's done for months now. I get so tired of seeing the newspaper in his face that I'm ready to rip it in half.

Doc said Clay might be weak for a while, maybe not ever as strong as he one was. But he's alive and he can get up and eat and talk and push the plow and plant the seeds and harvest 'em, should he want to.

But he don't want to.

My husband ain't planted nothin', not all year long. Not a single solitary seed. I got out there early in the morn' come springtime and plowed the soft earth; I painted the cotton plants with the solution to kill the boll weevils; I planted the squash and the okra and the tomatoes and the peppers and I prayed over 'em that they'd grow. I did it all early in the mornin' for months before the light began to show in the East.

I didn't want anybody, especially nobody in the congregation, or the Gums, to see me doin' it. To know my shame, Clay's shame.

That my husband won't talk anymore, that he won't even tend the garden that feeds us and keeps us alive. He don't care about nothin' no more, other than his Bible and the newspaper. And he ain't really readin' neither.

Now that we're onto the winter crops I ain't got the energy for the garden no more, and I don't reckon Clay gives a flip either way. It's a scraggly, embarrassing mess out there and I aim to let it stay that way.

"Clay?" I call again, a teardrop rolling down my nose and resting at the end of it; threatening to drop onto the dress I'm mending. It lingers there, salty and stubborn, refusing to fall. Clay doesn't answer. I knew he wouldn't, but I can't stop myself from testing him from time to time.

All day. Every day.

To think I've worked so hard, climbing backwards, sometimes by my fingernails, out of the madness that has tried to claim me so many times. I've clawed my way out as best I can. And yet my

own husband sits in bed all day starin' at the wall, not talkin', becoming a shell. The man who used to dance with me in the parlor and oil my antique piano and wrote the best sermons, and who always looked on me with the kindest eye, evne kinder than his words. Always gentle, always loving...

...the very person who pulled me out of the darkness, my Clay, has now fallen into it head first.

And I'm so scared.

For us both.

I'm glad Little Clay is outside because I can't stop the tears once they start to fall. I put my head in my hands and cry, resting my face in the soft, worn cotton of my dress. A sewing pin pokes me in the chin and I don't even notice the bead of blood that trickles onto the cloth, staining the white and blue fabric crimson.

The knock on the screen door scares the life out of me. I jump a mile in the air.

In the past, Clay would have gone to the door to answer if we'd had unexpected visitors during the day; he was always lookin' out, keepin' me safe. I sit at the sewing table for a minute, waiting to hear him shuffle off the bed and to the door, but the house is silent.

I hear another knock. I wipe my eyes and walk to the screen door, hopin' my face doesn't look as swollen from cryin' as I suspect it is. I smooth my apron over my meager dress and square my shoulders.

There's a Black man standing on the stoop, and he's got on a wide-brimmed straw hat, the type men wear when they're out in the fields. As I approach to open the screen, I can just barely see under the brim to recognize the soft brown eyes of Durell Drake, who lives just over the railroad tracks, by the church.

Durell is a nice man. He does a lot of landscapin' for the church and cemetery, and his wife works as a housemaid for the Carruth family; her name is Lisette, which I always thought was a right pretty name. Clay just adores 'em both. He always talks of how hard of a worker Durell is, and how much he appreciates him. He'd be lost without him, to tell the truth, now that his body is startin' to give out.

It ain't ever sat right with me that Durell and Lisette stand up in the back of the church when they attend service. It's true that they got their own church with their own kind but our church is just next door and besides, Durell does so much work for the congregation that he ought to be allowed to sit right in the front row, you ask me. It ain't right, so much he does for us, especially for Clay.

I asked Clay about it once, right after we was married, bold as brass I was, but I really wanted to know. Ain't a man of god supposed to talk with you about anything? - and Clay said he reckoned he agreed with me. He said he always told Durell he was welcome at church service and that he never outright told Durell he and Ms. Lisette couldn't sit in the pews. But that he reckoned they just knew they ought not to, because certain folks in the congregation might get sore about it, and raise a commotion. "We're all equal children in the eyes of the Lord, Sivvy," Clay had told me, his eyes sincere, "but some folks in our community don't think the colors should mix. You seen some of that first hand. And I can't change everybody's heart, all at once."

A pitiful explanation. A man of God ought not make such excuses for folks' sinful, shameful ways. But I was a coward and Clay is my husband, so I didn't answer back.

Durell's sweatin' like the dickens; his whole face is drenched. I open the screen door and usher him inside with my hand, but he hovers by the door. "Why, Mr. Drake, you come on in and get you a glass of tea!" I exclaim, happy to see him. "It's warmer than any November ought to be out there and you look drenched through with sweat."

"I thank ya kindly, but no'm, that wouldn't be proper," Durell says in his deep, melodious voice. I've often thought he'd make a better preacher than the one we got. Just another thought I keep to myself. "I came to see if you needed any help with the garden."

"Why, whatcha mean, Mr. Drake?" I ask, my eyes goin' wide.

Little Clay bounds up the stairs onto the porch and Durell picks him up, throwing him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Little Clay is laughing to beat the band and I smile. Clay hasn't played with him like that in a long time. "Well, I heared that Preacher still ailin' and hadn't been able to get to the crops, and you been doin' it on your own...I know you got other things to do, tendin' the youngin' and all. I aim to help you a bit out in the garden, if you don't mind. Got to get them sweet potatoes in hand." He tickles Little Clay and puts him down, and Clay immediately starts hanging on his legs.

My mind races. "Where'd you hear that, Mr. Drake?" My eyes narrow. I'm mad at him but it ain't his fault.

He can see my anger, my embarrassment, but brushes on past it, his voice low and calm. He wipes the sweat from his eyes, smiling down at Little Clay, who is still dangling from his leg. "Oh, you know this town. I reckon the youngin' here said something to Ms. Gum, and she told her husband, Mr. Rob, and he mentioned it to me when I went in to pick up some barbeque..."

The whole damn town knows, then. I feel my eyes start to fill up again. I wonder if Clay can hear this exchange in the bedroom, if he feels ashamed. If he does or he doesn't, it don't matter a lick, 'cause he still ain't gettin' out of bed.

"Don't fret about it none, Ms. Shelnutt," Durell says kindly, tipping his hat back a little. "We all been through it this year past. And Mr. Clay done been through more than most. All he done for us? Why, he deserves a bit of Christian kindness in turn. He's still recoverin', and that's what neighbors is for, ain't they?"

"I...I...I cain't ask you to tend my garden." I say feebly, humiliated. "There ain't much left to tend, honestly, and...well, Clay'll get to it when he can."

"I won't hear another word, Mrs. Shelnutt." Durell says, pushing his hat back down over his eyes. "I'm happy to help. You always been kind to me. And I won't pester you no more. Just if'n you see me out in the garden, you'll know not to fret. It's on'y me."

"I...thank you."

Durell makes no further reply, only pushes his hat down further and heads off in the direction of our garden, Little Clay fast on his heels. I watch him from the window as he pulls the hoe and shovel from where they're propped up beside the barn - where I'd left them because I couldn't remember

where to put them back - and hands a small hand shovel to my boy, who jumps right into the fray. He's going to ruin his clean overalls. As Durell starts to dig in the dirt, I go back to my sewing table, feeling even worse than before and resume my crying.

Damn the drought, and the flu, and damn you too, you fly. You demon from hell.

Later, I take a glass of cold sweet tea to Durell. He takes the glass and drains it in a gulp, passing it back to me wordlessly, the salty sweat that drips from his face almost resembling a flood of tears. He pulls up a corner of his shirt and wipes at his face, then smiles at me.

"I just about got it licked. I might knock off for the day and come back tomorry to finish the rest, if'n you don't mind. I'll try to get it finished up before Friday; we got a cold snap coming in at the weekend, I hear."

"That's a relief; it's been hot as the dickens. I sure appreciate you, Durell." I say sincerely. "Can I get you another glass? A piece of cornbread?"

He shakes his head. "No'm. Lisette got dinner on for me. I reckon I'll walk on home."

It's long past supper time, for us, too, and I haven't even started. I follow Durell around to the front yard and to the gate, both of us walking silently, the oppressive humidity pushing down on our shoulders like hot, wet towels. I open the gate for him and he moseys on through, turning around to tip his hat to me. The mailman is approaching, too, late today - I only pray there's no bills.

"Well, till tomorry, then." Durell Drake says with a grin.

"Thank you again, Mr. Drake, and we'll see you tomorry." I say, and he walks on down the road, a perfect circle of sweat darkening the back of his blue work shirt.

I move to close the gate just as the mailman, Ray Farmer, pulls up to the mailbox. He rolls down his window and tosses the mail at me. I miss, and it lands in the grass beside my feet. I stare at him, my brow furrowed. I've never seen him act such before. His entire face is a thundercloud, if thunderclouds can be red.

"How-do, Mr. Farmer?" I say brightly, though I'd like to scratch out his eyes for throwin' the mail at me like that.

He doesn't greet me back, only stares at me for a beat with his pale blue eyes.

"What would yer husband, the preacherman, say if he knew you was just entertainin' a colored man at your front gate?" He asks, as though he were asking for the time. He looks pointedly down at my legs, which are bare. I hadn't planned to leave the house today, so I hadn't put on my stockings.

"Well," I say, standing up to my full height and pushing out my shoulders, "If you're so curious, Mr. Farmer, why don't you come on in the house and ask him?"

He hits the gas and speeds off down the dirt road, tires squalling, raising dust and dirt as he goes, and I hope to hell that Mr. Durell Drake has already made it home, or at least has the good sense to hide in the blackberry bushes as that joker drives past.

Later that night, supper finished and baths administered, and Clay still hasn't emerged from the bedroom. He took his supper on a tray in bed, and when I recounted what had happened with Mr. Durell Drake and the mailman, he'd looked pained and tired and sad all at once, put a finger to his brow and said with a deep, weary sigh, "I'll speak to Mr. Farmer." He said nothing more and I left the room, frustrated and angry and tired.

I sit in my favorite old yellow chair, plush and worn with age, and consider putting on my dressing gown and going up to bed. I can't seem to make myself move.

*You* and Janie Louise lurk in the corner, seeming to mock me. Her smile is sweet as ever, but I've learned not to trust it. As for yours, well, it never was a smile so much as a leer. By the way, I hate you.

"Shoo, fly." I whisper hotly, squeezing my eyes shut. I'll only say it once. Maybe that will be enough. I'm so tired of saying it.

"Mama?"

Little Clay is standing in the doorway, his eyes bright and shiny. My little Hosey has never been scared of a thing, not a day in his life. He was born with his little fists clenched – both of 'em – just like a prize fighter spoilin' for a skirmish. We liked to joke, Clay and me, that he was born ready to lick anybody who tried him. He might be a little weak and puny, and he ain't never gonna big a big boy, but he sure ain't scared of a body, no sirree.

Right now he looks scared, and I feel my arms prickle with gooseflesh.

"Mama." He says again, and I'm on my feet in a flash, scooping him up, his little socked feet slapping against my hip with the force of my movement. "I don't feel good."

And I'm running, running, off to the well for cold water, Clay Jr.'s little feet slapping against my hips, his face hot and sweaty against my shoulder - I know he's got a raging fever without even needing to touch his head - my breath ragged and panicked. I can feel my heart thumping hard in my chest, and I fight the urge to scream at the top of my lungs.

Because now I know who Janie Louise is here for.



*July 2020*

*Bullet Journal of LL*

*We had a "socially distanced" 4th of July; I would have sooner stayed home but the kid loves fireworks and even the most disillusioned of Americans cling to their traditions. What do they say the definition of insanity is? Doing the same thing over and over again but expecting a different result?*

*It was eerie. We parked our cars in a field near the airport, each one guided to its own spot a good eight to ten feet apart, the volunteer telling us through his mask, "We know people will ignore the rules and get out of their cars so this is just an extra precaution."*

*The fireworks came from multiple points in the sky, different areas all over Athens. It was hard to tell which ones were the official sanctioned ones and which ones were just randoms setting off their own. For some reason, this year, fireworks have been much easier to obtain and everybody has them; they've been setting them off for weeks already.*

*We eat greasy fast food hurriedly, napkins propped on our knees, tucking into our junk food like a last meal.*

*Just before the main fireworks start, a drone positions itself directly over us, its green flashing light pulsing silently as it hovers; I wonder, looking up at it, if I'll ever get used to drones. They always remind me of aliens; flying saucers. I've never been scared of them. I kind of envy them, to tell the truth.*

*The fireworks start. We all step out of our cars, masks positioned on our faces, and watch. I realize, a few minutes into the display, that it's almost completely silent. A chill goes up my back. The 4th of July celebrations of my childhood were a real spectacle. Cheering, laughing children, the sounds of traffic just beyond the trees, games, popcorn popping, live DJs popping in to make announcements, and so much music: big, cheesy brass band music, chorus classes singing patriotic favorites, the local radio station breaking in with the odd hit or two, and finally, just before the fireworks, the crowd would hush down and Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" - straight-up propaganda disguised as 80's cheese - would start the real show.*

*But now, in the year of our Lord 2020, it's silent. Silent as a tomb. We're all standing mute, our faces solemn under our masks, our sad eyes cast to the Heavens; quiet. The one lone voice I hear is a drunk woman from somewhere behind me, who declares in a transplanted vocal fry, "...the entire place was filled with...you know the type, like, Elizabeth Warren supporters..." I don't catch the whole thought, but it's enough.*

*I think to myself, again, "We are so broken."*

*I wonder if everyone watching these fireworks is thinking some variation of the same. We have been irretrievably changed. Can we ever go back? I don't think we can. What are we even celebrating?*

*Just a month before (how does the time pass so fast now?), I watched, in real-time, a CNN Broadcast. A full pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream sitting beside me on the table, forgotten and beginning to melt, because I couldn't rip my eyes away. The first I'd watched in a long time because I've lost my stomach for "BREAKING NEWS".*

*As we watched, Live, a reporter tried to narrate a scene that was, frankly, impossible to describe accurately. I can't even do it and I watched it with my own eyes as it transpired. Inside the CNN center, a throng of people - mainly cops and reporters, who were trying to retain some semblance of normal as*

*though all of this were just business as usual, all of them Walter Kronkites in the making, but some regular folks too - gathered and clustered in clumps, standing and watching the scene just beyond the glass doors. Outside of the doors, which had come to represent the wall between “us” and “them” in the span of ten minutes, gathered a group of youths, many of them Black, who were just standing there, watching. Silently observing. And yet, the stark contrast between the two groups - those inside and those out - was illustrated without the reporter having to say a word. He didn’t even have to put the suggestion in our minds. The unspoken inferred understanding was that “they” are dangerous; those outside, that is. Why?*

*Because they are angry, I suppose. As if they don’t have that right, and then some.*

*The reporter’s tone was calm and measured but there was a kind of hysteria, a barely-held-back frenzy that you could hear bubbling out of his words as he spoke. I wondered if he was excited by all this, or scared. Impossible to tell. The tension in the room could be felt at home. I ran my hands over my arms, twiddled my fingers, my stomach full of acid.*

*We have memorized so many people’s names - all of them reduced to hashtags - that it’s like reciting a poem to list them.*

*As we watched, a white kid who looked like he couldn’t be more than twelve years old started ramming his skateboard into the glass of the CNN Center. He did it again, and again. The cops stood there and watched as if frozen in time, doing nothing. Those of us watching all knew who would be blamed for this later, and it wasn’t the white kid with the skateboard.*

*A few moments later, someone tossed a lit firecracker through the doors and everyone raced to take cover. The reporter finally lost his composure, shouting, “Oh, shit!” before recovering himself.*

*Imagine watching democracy unravel in real time, but our delicate ears are not meant to hear the word “shit” on live TV. Someone think of the children!*

*We watched every night for a full week. The protests, the riots. The reporters on the television paid more attention to the looting than they did to their own colleagues, reporters and press, being arrested and shot with tear gas.*

*By the “end” (it isn’t really the end, but when the ratings-worthy drama stopped, the cameras left), a Wendy’s had burned to the ground, another Black man had been killed by police, and a few States had made half-hearted attempts to sanction their police or take the confederate flag down. A statue or two came down, maybe. The protests continue, but everybody got bored, so nobody is watching.*

*Now they’re trying to blame the rising surge of the pandemic on the protestors. Nevermind that scores of people were on beaches and at cookouts on Memorial Day or that just a couple of weeks before Black Lives Matter dominated the news cycle, armed “militia” stormed various state capitals to protest wearing masks. Armed with weapons and patches and other insignia that is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, these goshdarn patriots asserted their rights to...what exactly? Be reckless with their health and that of others?*

*Their body, their choice...*

*...didn’t I hear that somewhere before?*

*As of this writing, the coronavirus cases have surged so high that I've stopped keeping track. The last I heard in concrete numbers, we'd lost over 129,000 Americans and something like 500,000 had been infected. There's only four beds left in North Georgia. I read that Florida, our next door neighbor, saw a record-breaking surge in cases - something like 10,000 cases **overnight**.*

*(as of this edit, Florida saw a "record-smashing" 15,000 cases in one day. The news covers it like they're winning a goddamn sports tournament)*

*They tried to squash the research, the studies that show that black and brown people are three times more likely to sicken from Covid-19 and far more likely to die from it. When you take this information, and then look at people protesting because they don't want to wear their masks, who call coronavirus a "hoax" and claim it's no deadlier than the flu, who refuse to accept that we're in a crisis...how can you look at these as two separate issues? They are intrinsically tied.*

*They're talking about sending the kids back to school in a month. There are only four ICU beds left in North Georgia. One month. And the masks are "optional".*

*I've always been such a history buff. Since I was old enough to read I've poured over classic novels, The Diary of Anne Frank, encyclopedias and history books, watched documentaries on everything from The Great Depression to World War II and Vietnam and more. I've always been enamored with history and people from the past. I've spent twenty years tracing every line in my family's genealogy and gleefully discovering nuggets about my ancestors and what major events they might have lived through. Wanting to know every part of their culture, every historical landmark that dots their story, to learn their experience so intimately that it's like seeing through their eyes, walking in their shoes.*

*Now I feel like a fool.*

*The stories aren't just stories. History is not just an anecdote to consume, to study, to recite as a measure of intelligence. These stories are **not** stories.*

*They are cautionary tales, warnings.*

*And we have failed to heed every single one.*

*Lord help us all.*



*December 1918*

*From the Diary of Sivvy Shelnut*

*Another day, another newspaper article.*

*They reckon' what we went through last year might be "The Worst Pandemic in History", but I reckon you can't just say somethin' like that. After all, history ain't done yet, is it? What if the worst one is yet to come?*

*Well, for other folks, maybe. There ain't nothing worse for me.*

*Just like my Clay, I done run out of words.*

*Just as well, since the place I'm goin' don't require none.*

A hand rests gently on my shoulder. "He's with the Good Lord now," Miriam Gum says kindly, her touch feather light, as though she's afraid to apply pressure. I don't respond; only lay there, swaddled in covers. They are so tightly bound around me that I can barely move my arms. I don't know who brought me back to bed and wrapped me up - perhaps it was Clay, or perhaps Miriam herself, who has been a constant presence in the house since it happened. *The Good Lord*, I think, wishing I could remember how to laugh. What's so good about him? I'd rather my baby be with anyone else, tell the truth.

I snapped at Miriam at one point after the funeral - I told her to "scatter on home, you meddlin' bitch" - I said some other things too, unkind things that I'm too ashamed to repeat. She took all my abuse and stood there, two red splotches on her pretty apple cheeks, her color high but her face pinched and sad. She just stood there and let me yell at her. It wasn't my proudest moment, but there are worse things I did after that.

Later, just outside the room I heard Clay apologizing on my behalf. "She's mad with grief," he said to her, and I could hear her soft voice clucking in agreement, "She don't know what she's sayin'. She don't mean to take it out on nobody, 'specially you, after all you done for us."

Hot fury bubbled up in my belly when I heard that. Clay Shelnutt, my husband, who laid in bed for months straight, ignorin' me, starin' at the wall, willing his own self to die, has the nerve to apologize for *my* behavior now?

I tell you theys different rules for men than there is for women.

But that don't matter now, either.

I really ain't mad at Miriam Gum. She shouldn't be here, now - she turned up with a casserole yesterday and Clay sent her away; that she came back today means she really does care. She's been a true friend to me since I been here, a true friend. Her husband, too. And Durell Drake - he and his wife Lisette came back just after the funeral to give their condolences. They didn't come to the funeral; they was afraid tongues would wag or somebody might cause a scene. They didn't want to do nothin' to stress me and Clay. They too good for us; I always thought so.

They came to my bedside and gave me the loveliest bouquet of stargazer lilies. I didn't have the heart to tell 'em I'm allergic. They give me a frightful headache and make my nose run like a leaky faucet. So when I started apologizin' for that day the mailman got mad - the day Durell came and helped with the winter harvest - my nose was pourin' and my eyes were red and puffy, and I kept wipin' at my face, the two of 'em just standin' there looking at me with sad, solemn eyes. I told 'em they had every

right to be at church and not to let no dang mailman tell 'em who they can and can't mix with, the tears just runnin' down my face. Durell's eyebrows looked like two caterpillars smooshed together. He looked mighty uncomfortable, and they both inched towards the door. He said they ought not bother me no more, since they was only making me upset. I declared, that no, I wasn't upset, it was only my allergies, on account of me bein' allergic to stargazer lilies.

Lisette's eyes welled up and she said in a real soft, cream-and-sugar voice, "Why, honey, them stargazers is silks. They ain't real, sweet. Lillies don't grow in December."

And Durell come over to the bed and he patted me on the head when he left, and that pat had more kindness in it than I could bear. I knew, then. What my fate would be.

Why couldn't I have caught it? What a relief that would have been, had I been the one to die.

My hands been just a'shaking. I bury them under the covers most of the time to hide the shakes, and also because I can't bear to look at how dirty and ragged they are. After the burial I got down in the dirt and tried to dig up the grave. I was laying in the fresh, musty earth, screaming about how I wanted to join my boy. I scratched and dug until I broke all my fingernails and my fingers were bleeding. I don't remember any of it; Clay told me later. He must be telling the truth because my hands are a real sight. They hurt, but the pain feels far away and somehow not real.

All this time the newspapers said that the flu was killin' folks different. They said that this time, young kids was havin' an easier time of it. If it was any consolation for the sheer amount of folks the damn flu killed, it was that...that the kids were mainly alright. Every night when I'd get on my knees to say my nightly prayers, I would thank the good Lord for my Clay Jr. bein' safe, bein' well. When your baby has always been sickly, every day feels like a small mercy.

So much for prayers. Tell you true, I lost most of my faith before I was 16 years old. You see what I seen, it's hard to cling to the Lord. But whatever shred of belief I had left is surely gone now. If that means hell awaits me, well, I'll gladly go. Suits me fine.

It started with the fever. I'll never forget him standin' in the doorway with his little socked feet. The way he said, "Mama." He was hotter than the furnace. I ran to the well for cool water as fast as my legs could carry me. I screamed for Clay to fetch the doctor. He was up and out the door faster than a streak of lightnin'. After months of layin' around in bed like a listless fool he sure did move fast. I guess if it's some consolation he finally did get up and out of the bed. Not that it did no good. By the time he finally found the Doc and they got back, my baby was coughin' and throwin' up and delirious with fever.

I don't remember much after that. I'm grateful for that, now. I suppose one night when it's real quiet all my memories will come back to me and strangle me in my bed as I sleep. That will be alright, I suppose.

One thing I do remember - looking up from my son's sweaty bed, my hands on his clammy little arms, stroking him, just tryin' to offer him comfort, a Mama's love - and seein' Janie Louise there, in the corner. Her shining, curling hair framing her face so beautifully, her eyes glistening as though filled with tears. For the first time since the first I'd noticed her, she was alone.

That's all I remember of when Little Clay died.

After the funeral, I noticed Janie Louise was gone. It's been two days and I ain't seen hide nor hair of her in the corners. No more shining hair, sweet smiling mouth, or kind, soft eyes. But *you're* back. Of course you are.

Oh, it's just as well, ain't it. You might as well come on with me, for where I'm goin', folks like you - spectres, haunts, boogers, haints - are a welcome sight. As natural as the speckles on a fresh farm egg.

Just a few short hours ago you opened your wide, grinning mouth and you spoke.

I almost fell out of the bed with shock. To hear your voice after all this time.

And it was real, so real. Deep and almost velvety, an oddly soothing voice to come out of such a sinister face. I could hear it in my ears, real, and familiar, too, as though you were standing right beside me.

"Get the knife, gal." Your voice said.

And then I was fingering the blade of the knife I'd hidden under the mattress hours before. I ain't got no recollection of doin' such, but I reckon I must have. I pulled out that knife and I looked over at the sleepin' body of my husband, curled up in the chair, snoring lightly. He finally left his bedroom to watch over me, and I reckon I ought to feel comforted by that, loved, even, but I don't feel nothin' but empty space.

He woke up just in time. For an old man, Clayton Shelnutt sure can be sly.

I ain't really mad at Clay. He ain't done nothin' but cry these days past. His heart is broke; I can tell. Whatever strength he has left, I reckon it's just enough to see me safely away, and then he'll be here all by himself, starin' at the walls again, till his last. It ain't fair, Lord. Clay's lost everybody: his parents, his wife, all three of his children, and me, too. We've lost each other, and it's far too dark to find ourselves again.

Now, I'm layin' here in this bed wrapped up like a parcel, and the kindly face of Miriam Gum hovers over me, her hand still on my shoulder. If I could reach for a knife I'd surely stab her just to keep her from touchin' me. But that knife is long gone and I'm wrapped up like a mummy. Bound like a swaddlin' baby. I look at her serenely. Time seems to speed up and slow down again. Her auburn hair catches the light from the windows and looks like fire.

"I'll come back tomorrow and tend you," she says kindly, her eyes filling with tears. "If you'll have me." Bless her heart, she's so upset for us. How much she cares. If only I felt anything.

I have no words anymore so I just nod. Ain't no sense in telling her I won't be here tomorrow. Clay told me, his eyes large and sad and brimming with his own tears, that he was sendin' me off to Milledgeville. I said nothing while he laid out his reasons and begged and pleaded with me not to hate him forever. He made promises - he'd come and get me when I was well, it wouldn't be long at all, no, I'd recover from this grief and I'd be better and then I could come on home, we could try again, we could have us another youngin' - he said all sorts of things, his face wet with tears, snifflin' and hiccupin' like a baby cryin' for his Mama. All the things he told me will never come to pass, and I know that. I can see

the future in his tender old eyes, and there is no future left for us. That was dead and buried with our boy, and it's probably for the best. Let him chase another rainbow; perhaps he'll find something much sweeter at the foot of the next.

There will be no more rainbows for me.

It's funny to think how I fretted and worried over goin' to a place like Milledgeville. How I would lay awake nights, worryin' on such a prison, prayin' to the Lord I'd never get sent to a place like that. Worryin' on those poor souls who burnt up in Oklahoma, worryin' on Mama's mute friend Dorthy at the ridge, hopin' I'd never become like them. Trying to hide what was inside me so I could stay out here, livin' amongst folks, being *free*.

Now I know there ain't no such thing as free.

Miriam squeezes my shoulder one more time and bites her lip in sympathy. In the corner, you loom over her, craning your neck, as though you're tryin' to read a headline over her shoulder. I can't see your damned eyes but I know if I saw them, they'd be black as coal.

I open my mouth and dig deep, deep, to find what sliver of voice I have left, to speak the last words I'll speak in years, to say one final thing to the bed, the room, the house in which I broke; and when I finally croak out those words I'm not sure who I'm speaking to; Miriam, you, myself, the air - it doesn't matter, nothing does.

My dry, cracked lips form the words, and I whisper, in a voice I no longer recognize, "Shoo, fly. Shoo." I close my tired, swollen eyes.

When I open them again, we're all of us gone. A particle of dust, illuminated from a beam of sunlight in the window, dancing in space; oblivion.



*Central State Hospital/Milledgeville Asylum*

**Notes from the author:**

*\*The characters of Sivvy Shelnutt (nee Hargrove), Clayton Shelnutt, Clay Jr., Rob Gum and Miriam Gum originally appear in the novel Monarchs Under the Sassafras Tree, by Lillah Lawson, published in September 2019 by Regal House Publishing.*

*\*\*"I'm Always Chasing Rainbows" was written by Joseph McCarthy and Henry Carroll, with music adapted from a composition by Chopin. Listen to the 1918 recording here:*

*[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_wNxDO6UmEc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wNxDO6UmEc)*

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