The Horror We Can't See

By June Ferrill

In the 1930s, after motor cars had replaced buggies, women had shown their legs and bobs still bounced, my Great Grandmother Rebecca Stark, entering her eighties and long-time widowed, still raised cattle and grew oats and cotton on her Texas farm near Post Oak. Born in Kentucky before the Civil War, she had lived on a small plantation. She told of having a Mammy, who would put her to bed every night saying, "Your eyes are so blue, they going to fade on the pillow."

She was only twelve when the Civil War began. Her father died in that war, serving the Confederacy in Kentucky. With her mother struggling to support the family, Rebecca did what desperate girls often did then. She married when she was six months shy of her 15th birthday. A fellow Kentuckian, Charles M.B. Stark was at least ten years older than she. After marrying, he would continue to fight in the war for two more years, not in Kentucky, but in the 10th Arkansas Calvary unit. After the war, Rebecca's family lost their plantation; they probably couldn't pay the taxes. For a while Rebecca and her husband lived in nearby Missouri, where their son Charles (Charlie) Stark was born. Eventually, they moved to Texas.

Widowed in her forties, she relied on her grown son Charlie not only to help with their farm but bring in extra money plowing fields and running a combine for neighbors. The daughter (who came to be known as Aunt Etta, short for Fluretta), two years younger than Charlie, stayed at home, planted vegetables in spring, canned in summer and helped make their clothes. Mother once asked her widowed grandmother Rebecca why she never remarried. She was pretty and had her own farm. She replied, "Why would I do that?" She must have valued her independence. In those times, she had more economic freedom as a widow than she would have had as a married woman. Until the 1960s in Texas, a married woman was expected to turn her own property over to her husband to manage. She couldn't get loans, credit, or sell her property without her husband's signature.

After the turn of a new century, Charlie brought home a bride, much to Great Grandmother's initial consternation. But they thrived.

Charlie eventually had his own farm and six children, one of whom died at age twelve. My mother, Beulah Frances, was next to the youngest of those six. (She told me and others about Great Grandma and Aunt Etta.) Charlie's family grew up planting cotton and raising white-faced Hereford cattle, harvesting vegetables, pears, apricots, and peaches. They also grew sweet, green Concord grapes that as a child, I picked from under a vining arbor. (I wouldn't taste that grape again until I moved to New Mexico and found the same sweetness growing in my Santa Fe yard. Instantly, I remembered where I had tasted it before.) Charlie had one of the greenest thumbs in Jack County and Aunt Etta helped Charlie's wife, Frances, with raising the children. Everyone had chores on the farm.

My mother was three when her twelve-year-old brother Luther died, and she remembered it well. He would often stay home from school because of headaches, she said. He died of a brain tumor and the doctors could do nothing. Not long before he died, he wanted to have his picture taken. Mother thinks he knew that he was going to die, and he wanted to be remembered. She would show me the picture and tell me the story. She would say that her mother grieved his death continuously for over two years, depressed and withdrawn, until another child, baby sister Christine, was born. "If it hadn't been for my father, I wouldn't have gotten much love or attention when I was still a baby myself," Mother said. (My cousin puts flowers on Luther's grave every Memorial Day. He is still remembered.)

My grandfather Charlie was a teaser with children. He would offer me a "chaw of chewing tobbacky," holding out his stained hand clutching the smelly, brown stuff. I would make a face and shake my head "no", and he would laugh. Once he took me down Crooked Creek in his wagon with a team of horses. The creek was on their farm and very shallow with prehistoric oyster shells in its bed. We stopped to pick up some shells and I proudly brought them back to my Fort Worth home. He was a gentle, handsome man with the clear, bonny blue eyes of his mother. When I knew him, he spoke little but smiled with his eyes and seemed to love children. My mother said she only remembered his spanking her once. She was seven years old and he had decided that she needed to help them hoe down the weeds growing around the cotton. They called it *chopping cotton.* Mother must have taken that literally because she cut down the small cotton plants and left the weeds. He spanked her.

She never forgot that. Later in life, she put herself in his place and said that Papa, as she called him, was upset that spring because both his eldest son and his eldest daughter were leaving home. He was losing his best help and decided he needed my mom in the field, young as she was.

Granddad paid attention to me when we would drive the seventy miles from Fort Worth to visit, but my grandmother never did. Mother said it was because she had already had a lot of grandchildren (some of whom were grown) before I came along. And she had another granddaughter, Lilly, shortly after I came along. I do remember Grandma speaking to me one time. I was playing hide-and-seek with my cousin Lilly on the screened- in porch; and as Grandma was sweeping the floor, she spied me behind a door. She smiled and said, "I like to see children getting along and playing." That's the only time I think she ever noticed me.

But back to the times before I was born. When the 1930s Depression came, my Mother's three oldest brothers had left home and were working. Her oldest sister had married. When jobs disappeared, the boys moved back. None of them had yet married.

Charlie said, "We won't starve. We'll slaughter a steer, milk the cow, hatch chickens, fatten a pig, and grow more vegetables."

My sixteen-year-old mother was disappointed because she would now have to give up driving the family car; the boys took it over. But those older brothers did provide a diversion for her, taking her with them to weekend dances around the countryside. One brother, Ellis, was a caller at square dances while the other brother, Ira, played the guitar and harmonica. Mother said that there were times when it was almost dawn before they got home on a Sunday morning, then took a nap, ate breakfast and dressed for church.

Their dad worried about the miles being put on the car. "When the tires go, I'm not buying new ones, can't afford it. We'll be back to hitching up the old team," he told the boys.

Worse than the possibility of no longer having a car—my mother's hopes of ever going to college were crushed. She had dreamed of being a fashion designer, had been making clothes for the family since she was eleven and was cutting her own patterns out of the newspaper.

During this same time, Great Grandma Rebecca, with the boys' help, still farmed with her daughter, who had never married. Then, unexpectedly, the uncontrollable horror struck. Etta got tuberculosis, which they called consumption. There was no going to a sanitorium in sunny New Mexico. Mother and daughter stayed at home in Texas, where they'd always been. It took a while for the sturdy pioneer mother to catch the disease from her daughter and for emaciation to begin. Family didn't isolate then. Charlie's family brought food, tended Grandma's crops, soaked clothes in boiling water and lye soap and washed their hands in kerosene. All the household chores were done without running water or electricity. Of course, nothing could stop the inevitable. It came first for the daughter and then, the mother.

As a child, hearing this story from my mother, I wondered how Great Grandma could possibly resign herself to her death sentence. How could she stay in that grim, germ-filled farmhouse waiting for the horror, the ever-expanding flow to fill her lungs and suffocate her?... Now, in the times of Coronavirus, I understand.

Now, in this time of the Coronavirus, my mind's eye sees the horror movie menace that can't really be seen. Like in those movies I visualize ever expanding slime taking over streets, growing tall as Brooklyn Bridge and sweeping down avenues where frantic, screaming men and women try to outrun it. But worse than that, in reality we can't see this slime that will invade and harden, suffocating lungs.. We dart and dash and side-step, trying to stay out of its way.

Unlike the Kennedy Assassination, the first National Tragedy I remember, and 9/11, the last tragedy I remember, this time I don't remember where I first heard of this virus. I vaguely recall seeing something on TV about Wuhan and a virus and viewing white plastic suited, masked men spraying streets. It came from a bat, they said. They eat everything there, I thought, and dismissed it.

Today, April Fool's Day, 2020, it has taken over our lives. In the 1800s, the days of massive outbreaks of tuberculosis, yellow fever, and malaria, only the newspapers and letters told the

grim stories. Today I read the *Santa Fe new Mexican* every morning to find out the number of new cases here and then turn on Governor Cuomo to see how many test kits he still needs and how many New Yorkers have died in twenty-four hours. I stopped watching Trump. Yesterday, someone told me Trump has finally caught on.. "Reaaaaaally?" I said, sarcasm dripping off my tongue.

Friends have been calling daily. One friend I haven't spoken to in four years, not since going to his son's Muslim wedding in Dearborn. Now the son has two children in Portland. My friend and his wife, happy grandparents in their *vulnerable* years, are in Portland, taking care of the grandchildren, while the parents, in separate rooms, try to work from home. The grandparents have two other children, both of whom are doctors. One is a dermatologist who may lose his practice. No patients are coming to his office now. "He's young enough to recover, financially, "I say, trying to be optimistic. The other son, they worry he will lose his life.

Another friend called me from Houston. She tells me it's like the flu, and more will die from the flu. I tell her more will die from this virus, according to the modeling. She says we don't know. There are different models. She says she's worried about her son who has severe asthma. I know now why she has watched Fox News and Donald Trump. Numbers like the flu are easier to handle. Now what will she do since Trump has "caught on."

Like when watching a horror movie, I don't believe this crisis is real. I think maybe I can just turn it off. But while unreality sweeps my brain, my body takes action. The hands itch from foam and hot water; the doorknobs, kitchen countertops and tables are cloroxed. I conserve the alcohol (not the drinking kind), afraid it will run out, as I spray food preparation areas.

Last week, my son Robert came from Los Angeles with a friend, Devin. Devin's mother has the virus. She caught it being a manager in a flagship Albertson's Grocery, Las Vegas, Nevada. The first virus-struck person I've known, one degree of separation. She's at home. We all say she will be fine. She's young, we say.

Devin and Robert are staying at our rental house on Canyon Road. All the short-term renters cancelled. After stocking the house with toilet paper, food, antiseptic wipes and spray, I haven't been back since they arrived.

Monday was Robert's birthday, and five of us celebrated at our house complete with a cake and a balloon. (Five is the most who can congregate here, orders of the Governor.) We ate on TV trays in the living room so we could keep social distance. All had to wash their hands when entering the house.

While we sang "Happy Birthday," I watched my son pinch out the candles, no blowing them out. Viking tall and Los Angeles tan, he seemed just a little shy with all the attention in this time of national crisis. Silently, I prayed we'd all survive.

When everyone left, I sprayed doorknobs and TV trays with alcohol and threw paper napkins away while wearing latex gloves.

Except for the birthday dinner, I isolate, only going to the grocery, wearing a mask and gloves. I first thought of this as a time of retreat. For Christians, Lent is supposed to be a time of contemplation. It's never been that for me, but maybe now, I thought. I'll contemplate nature. I'll watch the Mountain Bluejays feed. I'll fertilize the tulips and apple trees. I'll pull up the grass crowding my perennials. I'll write. I'll read Whitman ("Lilacs Once in the Courtyard Bloomed") and Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*, dreaming of Cannes.

But no.

For many people, maybe even most people, contemplation goes against nature. The groups I belong to want to keep going, the survival of the group being paramount. And every group I belong to is now using ZOOM. This week—three ZOOM meetings. Some, like the ARRUF memoir writing group, I love. Others I can do without. For example, the Curriculum Committee of a "life-long" learning group had to meet to plan the Fall Semester. When I volunteered that people may not sign up for "life-long" learning in August, one Zoomer said, "We have to be positive." (Seems like I've heard that somewhere before.)

My Great-Grandmother didn't have ZOOM. She didn't have to virtually keep up with her sewing group. Maybe she would have been better off if she could have. Maybe they just came to see her, bringing food, and keeping their distance. She didn't know how many people in Jack County, Texas, had TB. She didn't see the deaths in New York. She didn't worry about making the cut for a ventilator.