

JAMIE GIBBS

APPARITIONS

THE SOLDIER SMELLS SMOKE—not the putrid smoke of carnage, but the sweet smoke of a hearth. He comes to a ridge and crawls along the top. The smell is thicker and warm to the nose. Over the ridge he sees the curls of black smoke coming from a chimney. No one is outside. He moves over the ridge and stops behind a stand of oak trees. A man steps out of the cabin and tosses leftover bread to the chickens he has caged a few yards from the porch. The man is old and small—not short, but bent with age and work. The soldier watches as the old man pisses off the porch into the snow and heads back inside. He sits still and waits until it is dark enough for him to slip in and get a chicken.

The chickens are easily visible from the front window of the cabin. He needs to be quiet and quick. He bends and runs across the yard. His steps are light and fast. When he gets to the pen, he crouches and watches the cabin. He is weak and can feel a fever growing in his body. He shoots off a few muffled coughs into his arm. He checks to make sure that no one is moving inside. Then he pulls the pin from the gate and the chickens scatter. The beat of their feathers and the scratching of their feet in the snow and dirt are louder than he expected. His heart pounds and the rifle slung over his shoulder begins to slip. He pulls it off and tosses it aside. Arms wide, he tries to herd the chickens into a corner. They jump and scratch at each other. Their voices click and rise in the quiet evening. He pushes one into a corner and falls while trying to catch it. The chicken tries to jump and climb over him, but he quickly grabs it. He is ready to snap its neck when a light shines on him brighter than that of the moon and the stars.

The soldier stops. He is on his knees, and his rifle is lying in the snow a few feet away. The chicken runs off towards the others. The old man sees the rifle, and the soldier watches the old man. Then the old man sighs deeply.

Listen, there ain't no need to steal, he says. We'll feed you in here if a meal is what you're after. The old man lowers his eyes and pulls his hands

out of his pockets, palms open and facing the soldier. I ain't looking at your colours. It makes no difference to us. I'd just rather give you a meal than have you steal my chickens.

Who else is in there, the soldier asks.

Just the wife.

Bring her out here.

Sarah, come out here a moment.

The door opens and a little old lady steps out. She is wearing an apron over her dark dress, and her white hair is pulled tight in a bun. Her arms are thin and ropey, and her face is sunken and raw.

It's just the two of us here. It's warm, and we'll give you a meal. We're Christians if that means something to you, the old man says.

The soldier picks up his rifle and stands as snow begins to fall from the black sky. Alright, he says. I'd appreciate it.

Sarah keeps looking at the soldier while he eats. The meal is a winter stew with root vegetables and some dried basil and rabbit. It is hot, thick, and filling. The soldier eats quickly while his body and mind relax in the heat.

How old you say you were? Sarah asks.

Nineteen.

Her eyes dart to her husband's.

How'd you get yourself mixed up in this? She asks.

The old man puts down his fork and watches her.

Volunteered.

Lord, she says.

The soldier's face reddens. He takes a deep intake of breath and then coughs. They are tight and loud, like a dog's bark. He struggles to catch his breath, and his knuckles whiten as they grip the edge of the table.

The old man hands him a cup of water. He sips it slowly, and his cough gradually subsides.

Where you from anyway? That voice ain't from these parts.

Lake Charles, Louisiana, the soldier says.

You must be nearly frozen. It's a normal winter for us, but I imagine it's much colder than down in Louisiana.

The soldier nods.

Have you walked long?

Since dawn.

Were you alone at dawn?

No.

So we can assume the rest of you aren't coming this way then?

The soldier is tired, and the warmth of the cabin and the fullness of his stomach have made his head light. He shrugs at the old man.

The old man takes the hint and, with his eyes on the soldier's rifle strapped over his shoulder, stops the interrogation.

Move to the fire and warm up. You don't have to leave tonight. Rest.

The soldier moves to the fire, and the old man holds his elbow. He is drunk, lopsided, and heavy-eyed with fatigue. Sarah hands him a blanket, and as he makes his way towards the fire he notices a picture on the mantel with dried flowers piled in front of it. It is a picture of a boy dressed in union garb holding a sabre regally to his side like an old-world general. The boy has the old man's dark, deep-set eyes and his wife's mouth and nose.

Sarah rests her hands on her legs, sits in her rocking chair, and watches the soldier sleep fitfully on the floor wrapped in blankets, sweat dripping from his forehead. He calls out in his sleep, and she watches his hands swat away whatever flies or bullets are bothering him. His brow is furrowed, and tears slide down along his nose. Sarah turns to the old man and says that the boy is very sick. He nods in acknowledgment while he tinkers with the soldier's rifle and chews on his pipe.

Sarah places the back of her hand on his forehead and feels the heat seep from him. She rises and goes to the pantry and pulls out a knit cloth. She pulls her shawl tighter over her shoulders and opens the door. The snow is twisting in the wind, and the door slaps the wall behind her. She steps out into the darkness and down the steps. Her black dress is swept up and driven to the east with the wind. She bends, holding onto the end of the railing, and pushes the cloth into the soft airy snow until it is soaking and ice-cold. She goes back inside and latches the door shut.

The old man looks up from the rifle and watches Sarah walk across the cabin with the cold wet cloth. Jesus, you shouldn't be going outside in this weather. You near died from a fever every winter four years running and here you are strutting out in a blizzard.

He needs to cool down, Coleman. He's burning up. To think what they put these boys out in.

No one put this boy out anywhere. He ran away, Sarah. It's plain as day.

It makes no difference. He's still out here in the winter. There'd be no reason for him to be here if it weren't for them.

Tell him that when he wakes up and I'm sure he'll see it different.

Sarah places the cloth on the soldier's forehead. He shivers and moves his face away, but she follows it with the cloth still pressed against him. Soon enough he takes it, and it seems to soothe him. Throughout the night she goes back and forth cooling the cloth and pressing it against his forehead and the back of his neck. He frets less and less and sleeps through the night while she fights his fever for him.

By morning it becomes clear that the boy's fever won't break easily. Coleman carries him to the bed, while Sarah kills a chicken. She boils the meat in a broth with some dried herbs that she saved from the fall and then feeds it to him during the moments when he's almost conscious. He spits it up again and again, the broth staining the front of his shirt and the blanket she had given him. Sometimes he can't even see that she is there trying to feed him. She cleans his messes and rubs his wet hair. Coleman sometimes comes in and sits beside her. He holds her hand and watches as she struggles to save the boy.

The soldier's fever turns out to be relentless and will not break. Sarah crushes a batch of dried elderberry flowers in a bowl and mixes them into a cup of boiling water. As she sets it on the table to cool, the aroma is soft and flowery, hinting at spring's richness in the midst of a cold winter. She thinks back to when her grandson caught a fever and she made the same tea, just as her grandmother had back in the old days. She was told that elderberry tea saved more men from fever than the Lord himself. When it was cool, she poured it into a bottle and let the boy sip it until he couldn't any longer. She sat by the bed and waited with him. She made more tea and then let him rest. His little lungs rattled like chains when he coughed, and she prayed steadily while Coleman paced the cabin. After a few restless nights and bottle after bottle of tea, the boy's coughs gradually softened and his fever broke. Now, as she picks up the cup of hot elderberry tea, she silently prays that it will soften the soldier's fever and break up his tight coughs.

Every day and night Sarah stays with the soldier. She watches as he burns red and then shivers white, calling for his mother and whispering about a girl. When he calls out, she grabs his hand. He squeezes, though

his grip is weak and grows weaker still as time passes. When he whispers, she bends down to listen, leaving her ear close enough to his mouth to feel the warmth of the word. It is a girl's name—Colette. She asks about the girl when the soldier seems present, but he does not answer. He nods when asked if he needs water and shakes his head when asked if he feels better, but he remains silent when asked about Colette.

When the soldier dies they cover his body with an old bedsheet and pray for him. Sarah cries and holds the boy's cold, rigid hand, while Coleman thinks about what can be done with him. The ground is frozen and covered in snow, so he cannot be buried. His body could be left out in the woods, but questions would be asked during the thaw. Coleman waits until Sarah is away from the boy to discuss his solution, which is to drop the body in the river and make it disappear.

We can't just toss him in the river like some animal, Coleman. He's a boy.

But the ground is frozen, and it won't thaw anytime soon.

Could we keep him hidden in the snow until spring? Then we could give him a good Christian burial.

What if someone finds him? If it's the rebels, they'll think we killed him. If it's ours, they'll think we hid him. They shoot people for less.

But it's not right.

What's right these days? The whole world's gone mad, and we're stuck right deep in the middle of it.

That night Coleman wraps the body in the bedsheet, drags it out into the snow, and hides it behind the house under some branches.

Early in the morning, before the sun rises, he sits up and shakes Sarah awake.

You know they bury bodies at sea, he says. Christian burials. This is the same thing.

Sarah thinks it over and, though it pains her, decides that Coleman is right. She agrees to drop the body in the river.

Through the rest of the winter Sarah can't help thinking about the girl he loved and how she would never know that he called for her as he died. She can hardly stand the idea of the boy dying with her name on his lips

while she was at home with no idea of how much she meant to him. She even begins to dream about Colette. In her dreams Colette is standing near a lake, her brown hair pulling in the wind and cascading down her shoulders like water on rocks. When Sarah tells Coleman about her dreams, he tells her to try and leave it be.

She can hear the wind rock the cabin, the tree branches click and slap each other, and the snow brush against the wood. She watches the spot in front of the fireplace where he struggled with his fever, and she twirls her thumbs smooth as air and chews on a small piece of wax to offset the tension. When Coleman asks her what's wrong, she tells him that losing the boy makes her feel like she has lost her grandson again. Coleman places his hand on her shoulder and squeezes, caressing her with his thumb.

You'll feel better once spring comes.

Sarah nods and smiles, pushing her cheek against his hand. He feels coolness in her cheek.

You're freezing, he says.

I'm fine. Just stay like you are awhile. It helps.

The next morning, when Coleman comes in from tending the rabbits and chickens, she is sitting at the table with a piece of paper and one of his carpenter's pencils.

I'm writing that girl a letter. She deserves to know that that young man loved her.

Sarah.

She does.

You don't want to meddle with this. You don't know a thing about these people.

Every day she quarrels with the paper. As Coleman goes about his days, he sees her crumple and rip page after page. Sometimes she sticks with a single piece for a long while, and he thinks it's going well. Then he finds it crumpled up on the floor, in the waste basket, or in the fireplace. Sometimes he is able to read short phrases or words, and he sees what kind of letter she's writing. She is writing about her hopes for their grandson, whom they lost the previous year. Their daughter had died giving birth to him, and she would not reveal the father, so they raised him as their own. They had lived

a hard life, and that boy was their only solace. She is writing it all in the letter.

The winds gradually become dull, and the ground gradually becomes soft and wet. The mornings are bright, and the air is fresh. Sarah stops her writing for a while to help Coleman rake, clean, and air out the cabin. She smiles more now that the days are longer, and he feels younger than he did weeks before. But when the snow opens and the grass turns green, she is once again at the table, pencil in hand, writing.

Coleman lies awake in bed listening to the chickadees fight the robins for worms and insects as they sprout in the wet warming earth. He rolls over to Sarah's side of the bed, and it feels cool. He calls for her, and she answers from near the hearth. As soon as she opens the door, he knows where she is going. She is wearing a clean skirt, a wool sweater, a shawl, and her button-up boots. She usually wears Coleman's old work boots when she is outside in the yard or in the woods, but he can see that she shined her own and must have struggled to stuff her swollen feet into the rigid leather.

I'm going to town to mail the letter, she says as she ties her shawl under her chin. I'll be back before dark.

Want me to come with you? I can be ready in a few minutes.

She tells him that she is not much in the mood to talk, and it would be a boring day for him anyway. Then she leaves and walks out into the spring woods. The animals are restless, and she can hear them skittering and calling out to each other from behind the trees and ferns.

The town is a bit of a walk, but walking is easy in the spring. She walks through the forest and comes out near Fletcher's farm, where Coleman sometimes works and trades his chickens and rabbits and where her grandson once played in the barns. Mrs. Fletcher is out hanging laundry and waves when she sees Sarah appear from the forest. Sarah waves back and continues walking towards town.

Years ago she used to walk the same route with her grandson. When he was young and small, the walk would make his legs sore, so she would pick him up and carry him. It would hurt her back, but feeling the weight of his body resting on her own would feel as pleasant as anything else in this life.

As she arrives at the post office, she sees the crowd waiting for the new list of casualties to be posted. She remembers hearing from Mrs. Fletcher

that her grandson's name was on one such list. Sarah and Coleman walked to town that day in the pouring rain with their feet weighted by mud to see it with their own eyes. Now, as she walks past the crowd, she does not make eye contact with the few ladies who bid her good day. She does not want to betray her terror for them.

Inside, the office is throbbing with emotion. She waits in line as people ask after letters from their boys, and she watches as they try to cover their smiles when a letter once held in the hand of their loved one is placed tenderly in their palm. They vibrate with anticipation but try their best keep their jubilee silent as tears and muffled sobs echo from the crowd outside. When she is finally at the counter she asks that her letter be sent with today's mail.

The postmaster reads the envelope and sets it down on the counter. We don't send mail to the south, he says. There's no one who goes that way.

Just put it in with the mail. It'll get there, she says.

It won't, ma'am. And there's no address on this.

Please just send it. It will find its way.

It won't make it, ma'am. I really think you'd be better off holding onto it until we get this war all settled.

The line behind her buzzes with frustration, and she begins to tense and become irritated.

It is very important, she says. Just send it with the soldiers' mail. It'll get there.

The postmaster nods and again looks at the envelope, turning it over, inspecting it.

Do you know this lady's address, ma'am. I don't mind adding it.

I don't know it.

He can hear the frustration in her voice, and he relents.

I will put it in this here bag. It's going to Ohio, right along the river. If they have a way to cross it into the south they'll take it. If not, it'll get tossed in the trash. That's about the best I can do for you.

She thanks him and takes a last look at the envelope. It is addressed to Colette with the long brown hair, Lake Charles, Louisiana.

She leaves the post office and passes the crowd waiting on the steps. Then she walks out of the town, back to the fields and the forest. She walks through the biting afternoon wind back to her home, where Coleman is dozing on the steps. She slowly sits beside him and quietly lays her head on his

shoulder. He moves slightly, feeling her on him, and together they rest while the cool spring air cleans the world around them. She thinks of Colette with the long brown hair and imagines her tears as she reads the letter and learns that the boy was thinking of her when he passed, that he smiled as he was swept into the next world, and how love is eternal and a part of the air we breathe.