

The Spanish Flu Hits Home

Category: Contagion

written by Pris Campbell | March 2, 2020

I'm very sensitive to contagious illness; I have an almost nonfunctioning immune system. Even before the coronavirus, I wore masks on my limited outings and washed my hands often, telling people who were sick to come see me when well. But that's not the story I want to tell.

At age twelve, my mother was hit by the flu of 1918, but recovered. When the same flu hit even more ferociously in 1919, she was the only one well in the home, due to her immunity. Her parents, grandparents and the three of her five sibs still living there all got sick.

My mother's grandmother insisted that she wear garlic around her neck and eat onions, the equivalent of today's masks and sanitizers, so that when she appeared reeking, at each bed, her sibs told her to go away.

People up and down the street were sick and dying, and the hospital was almost full. As her mother worsened, the town doctor wrapped her in blankets and put her in his Model T to take her to one of the few hospitals with a bed available. My grandfather, so deeply in love, was distraught, but the doctor was firm. He had to stay home to ensure that one parent remained for the children. She died later that night,

When my Uncle Herman asked him what had happened—*Where is she?*—my grandfather said, "She's gone to be with God, son." My uncle replied, "But doesn't God know a little boy needs his mother?"

My mother told this story at family gatherings over the years. We shed tears each time over the grandmother who was prematurely taken from us, leaving only our grandfather, whom we never knew either. He was killed five years later by a drunk truck driver.

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