

Shires Secret

The year is 1847. My name is Jane Williams. As I was briskly walking to patient number four's room I tripped over a nail that protruded from the hard wood floor. And the cart that held the patients breakfast almost toppled over with me. Patient number four is really named Elizabeth Chastity Smith III. The family was one of most wealthy in New York, and when their child was diagnosed as mentally defective, they stuck her here. I helped myself up and as I did I could hear the patients, well, more like inmates at, *The Shires Insane Asylum* calling.

I am 13 years old but I have been at Shires since I was eight. I had come not because I was crazy, but because *they* found me. As I hobbled shoeless along a dirt road in January, a man who I would soon come to know as Mr. Hemmingworth came and rescued me from the frost. That was the last time Mr. Hemmingworth did anything that could be considered heroic. I quickly learned that he was the dean of an insane asylum, and while I would never vocalize this, he was as violent and unpredictable as the patients.

"Hello, Elizabeth." I greeted her like this every day. It took concentration and focus for her to reply back, but she was one of the kindest people to talk to.

"Hello Jane," said Elizabeth, wide-eyed and cheerful. Her blond curls and rosy cheeks emphasized her emotions. Every morning when I came with her breakfast of mushy hot-cereal, I would sprinkle sugar on the top just for her.

"Can I have some paper today?" asked Elizabeth. Sometimes her family would visit and leave her with gifts. Her favorite thing to do was to draw outside on the wood bench next to the rosebush. I've seen some of her drawings, but they don't capture how happy she is when she is drawing. She is one of the few people who can be blissful in this otherwise dank and haunted community. I ask God every day to let the other patients feel happy like she does. God has a point to prove.

"I'm sorry, no paper today." And then I move from Elizabeth's room down the rest of the hall.

Seventeen people have been fed--the same food they get every day, except it doesn't taste like food anymore. They accept this food with either impassive faces or disgust. Some stare at their bare walls while others talk to themselves. One of the scariest things of this place is that while the doors are shut you can hear the painful screams and eerie whispers of the patients. Now I stop at number eighteen.

Number eighteen is the one who I don't smile at. I remember as far back as my second day at the Shires, when I was eight. I pushed the cart of food to the patients while smiling because my hunger was also satisfied. I opened the door to find that Number eighteen had started a fire with two pieces of wood he got from god-knows-where. I screamed and threw the pitcher of water on the burning bedding. Number eighteen took offence to my actions and lashed out with the stick used to instigate the fire. I quickly dodged it, but my hair caught aflame. Another employee rescued me before my scorched hair burnt my skin. However, the knowledge that I have no physical injury doesn't help the trauma of the memory of being on fire.

I inhaled and prepared to go into number eighteen's room.

3, 2, ...1. I open the door and swiftly scoop the porridge into his bowl without eye making contact. I push the cart with porridge bowl in haste. I slam the door behind. My hands are shaking so violently it hinders my ability to lock the door. Every day it's the same routine. Every day I am so scared because I can remember. I remember the smell of blazing hair like the smell of chicken feathers when they are singed from the bird and the crackly sound of burning hair close to my ears. In general, when I am scared I pray to God. When I enter Number eighteen's room my heart beats to rhythm of the Lord's Prayer.

The door is shut. For the moment, I feel safe.

“Jane,” spoke Scarlett Littleton, another employee of Mr. Hemmingworth, as she came out of number fourteen's room “A new patient is arriving in an hour, prepare the tea and cookies for the doctor.”

Mrs. Littleton had voice that could reach volumes that could rival a clap of thunder, and it didn't take much impetus for her to use this voice. This woman had pasty skin and was rather large-busted and plump; a result of mothering seven children. Her husband worked as one of the groundskeepers here at the Shires. Her oldest son, Jonathan Littleton, was 15 years old and worked alongside his father. Jonathan is also one of my friends.

“Yes ma'am,” I said. I walked the hallways to the kitchen and put the tea pot on the wood stove. I made pecan, raspberry, butter cookies. They are simply delicious. I also arrange various cheeses, crackers and berries on a silver platter.

As the water boiled I went to wash up before I faced the doctor. It’s important to Mr. Hemmingworth that the doctor think we are a “tight-strapped institution.” I looked in the mirror at my curly brown hair coming from my bonnet (I never put my hair in braids because if I pull my hair too tight it gives me a headache). My gray dress looked much prettier without a soiled and stained apron atop it.

Satisfied with my appearance, I carried the tray and tea to Mr. Hemmingworth’s office. His office was a room situated at the front of our building by the grand porch that overlooks the landscape. It was a room far from the patients. A room with scarlet walls and tapestries that lined them’ and gave them an appearance of serene, control, and luxury. Basically, this room lied.

As I walked in the office, Mr. Hemmingworth had a dark suit on. He was discussing the new patient with the doctor.

“Mute, he is. And stubborn like a mule,” the doctor said in a baritone voice.

“We have many who are the same here,” Mr. Hemmingworth said unimpressed, as he looked at me. “Ahh, and this young lady will be Joshua’s caregiver. Her name is Jane Williams. Come here, lass.” The acknowledgement of my existence startled me. I walked toward where the men were sitting, confused.

“He will be a lucky patient to have this fine lady as his caregiver,” the doctor complimented. I quickly came to the conclusion I liked this doctor.

Prompt to agree, Mr. Hemmingworth stated “She’s fine, she is.”

My duty complete, I left the room before I could make out the next thing they said. As I walked out I saw the new patient, Joshua, hands cuffed and eyes down, being led by Jonathon Littleton to his room. Joshua had blond hair and dark eyes, and his chin was sharp and did not fit the rest of his face quite right.

As Jonathan walked up the stairs unimpressed with our new inmate, my stomach churned with a sense of dread.

I went to doing the rest of the day’s work. It was tedious and long. One of the patients soiled their bed, and only the divine knows how often I have washed soiled sheets from untrained adults. I cooked a lavish dinner for Mr. Hemmingworth and then made gruel for the inmates, although it was unfair because Mr. Hemmingworth’s meal could feed ten people.

As I went to deliver Mr. Hemmingworth’s abundant food my arms shook. Accustomed to working with the cries of patients, I am no stranger to the moans and wails of Shires. However, an unusual cry was coming from Mr. Hemmingworth’s office. Mr. Hemmingworth was probably disciplining one of the patients.

I prayed and my prayer took up all the space in my head, deafening the moaning. I prayed that I would leave this place. I prayed that Elizabeth would get drawing paper every day, that the inmates would be healed. I prayed that Mr. Hemmingworth would wander the woods and get lost. I prayed that I wasn’t here. But God must have a point prove, and I’m not privy to his plan. The cry stopped and the office door opened. I just put the tray down and left. I didn’t look at anything but the polished wood floor. I should have looked up.

I scurried to the unfurnished room that held my bed and bunched the covers in a fashion that would provide a place to rest my head. It was warm now anyway. I liked this room because the cries were silenced when the doors was shut. I could hear nothing but myself and my prayers. I prayed to God a long time like I do every night. I told *the Father* about my day and my plans and my feelings. I asked him about tomorrow. I drifted to dreams by whispering the rosary.

I arose early the next day and went to the new patient’s room. It was the same as all the others, bare and dank. I brought the porridge with a cautious smile. When he was deemed as being non-violent I spoke to him. He was sitting in his chair with his back turned away without acknowledging me. This was normal. I took his bowl to him and smiled. As I looked at him I saw his blackened eye, evidence that he must have been Mr. Hemmingworth’s latest victim.

“Poor thing,” I said to him as I gave him the porridge. It used to make me cry when I saw bruises on patients. I took the corner of my apron and dipped it in water. I went back and slowly put the moist cloth to the young man’s eye. I often talked to the patients even if they couldn’t talk back. I believed that they still need a friend, even if they didn’t know I was one.

“I can’t believe him. If you promise to keep a secret I would tell you I think Mr. Hemmingworth needs to say more than the rosary to not burn after his death. And I believe all people like *you* who are nice and handsome--you won’t have to walk through a gate to heaven. When you die, you’ll already be inside,” I tell him sweetly.

Jonathan appeared at the door with a package. “You always so cherry?” he said to me. I don’t honor his comment with a response.

“What do you have in the package?” I ask.

“Paper,” Jonathan says. I light up bright at the idea of seeing Elizabeth’s face. I thank Jonathan and take the box. I turn my attention back to Joshua, who is now eating. It doesn’t take a detective to notice something is very wrong with the way he is eating. Like the way a dog gulps down entire pieces of meat. His disproportionate small jaw must have been a birth defect.

I opened the package and give one piece of paper to Joshua. I set down the charcoal stick and say “I will be back to collect to your bowl.”

I shut the door, and I twist the lock.

“You don’t need to be so emotionally attached,” said Jonathon.

“Everybody deserves a friend.”

“These people can’t return friendship,” He bluntly states.

“You’re wrong!”

Knowing his argument will get nowhere with me, Jonathon smiles and says “I will see you at dinner,” and scratches his cheek with his dirt-drenched hands.

“I’ll meet you there,” I say

When I delivered the paper to Elizabeth her arms flailed in excitement. I helped her walk out to sit on the wood bench near the rose bush to draw. Her eyes glimmered and she started humming happy songs to herself. The roses, bright and colorful, shimmered in the golden sunlight but they didn’t compare to her eyes. I stood there watching her for a while.

Then I turned to go back and give the rest of the inmates there breakfast. I found the image of Elizabeth so fulfilling that I, too, started humming happy tunes. My heart was so warm I didn’t even realize it was *number eighteen’s room*. I went in and put down the porridge just as giddy as I was when I delivered food to the other patients.

I glanced up and I stared into him. To me, number eighteen never had a face before, he was just a fearful emotion. When I did imagine his features, I imagined him with red horns. Now I looked at the man’s face. And I nearly fell over with fright.

I didn’t know how to describe this to God. I just remember that my heart fluttered like the apocalypse came.

He had the same disproportionately small jaw as my friend, Joshua. And as I saw him eat the porridge he ate in the same manner as Joshua, with a jerking motion that almost seemed painful. I realized it was not a birth defect; these inmates both had their tongue’s cut from their mouth.

I screamed and ran from the room in a hurry. I slammed the door and locked it tight as I stood struggling to catch my breath. This idea made me cry and filled me with questions. It can’t be a coincidence. The biggest question I had was: if a person is incapable of understanding, then why go to such an extreme measure to silence him?

I ran to tell Jonathon. Then I stopped and realized it could be very dangerous that I know this. What could they be? Jonathon doesn’t deserve to know something like this, he is an innocent boy. I decided to return to Joshua’s room. He was sitting in his chair, and on the piece of paper I left him was this:

Help!
Did he burn the papers? If so, don’t lock the door and you will be protected.
Joshua Richardson

I slammed the door shut and I said to him.

“You are clearly not mental. Am I in danger?” My voice was clipped and my stress evident. My abdominal muscles were sharking so much I couldn’t breathe smoothly. He made eye contact with me and then looked at the paper. I gave it to him. He pointed to the line “did he burn the papers?” I figured he was referring to number eighteen. I had firsthand experience with him burning something.

“Patient number eighteen burned something five years ago, something worth protecting by death. As I tried to put out the fire, he felt a need to attack!” I figured, it all made sense. The truth made me understand how close I was to a kingdom of brimstone.

Joshua turned the paper over and wrote the same words. “Don’t lock the door and you will be protected.”

I somehow believed Joshua was telling the truth. I paused for a moment. I said “At the end of the day I will bring supper and the door will not lock, do not come out until I am far from this hallway.” My entire body shook and tears flowed most of the day. I cooked and accidentally burned Mr. Hemmingworth’s chicken. I messed up the laundry and spilled the tea and when I retrieved Elizabeth from the bench that I had left her to draw, even her presence left me feeling depleted and scared. That night I even spilled the soup as I deliver it. The last person I delivered it to was Joshua, and the lock did not turn shut.

I couldn’t sleep all that night. All I did was pray that I did the right thing, because after the deed was done I thought of the next piece. They must have done something severe or something vital to an obstruction of someone more powerful. That maybe *they* were the bad guys. That maybe it was me going to brimstone.

I rushed downstairs because of the shrieks of Ms. Littleton. She found that Number eighteen’s room’s door was wide open. That he was missing. His room looked the same as all the others, but the feeling of the room was trepidation and imprisonment.

Jonathon ran to get Mr. Hemmingworth only to find that Mr. Hemmingworth wasn’t here either. His office looked just the same as it did before but it felt of fear, ignorance and (strangely) loyalty.

I ran to Joshua’s room. It did not look the same as it did before. Everything was arranged wrong and a chair was broken. However, the room felt the same: bare, dank, scary, and important. As I looked I saw atop his bed a note was titled “thank you.” My eyes followed the note that led me to a bag and out of the bag came money, a lot of money. I don’t know where he got the paper or how he got the money or why he needed to ransack his room if the door was unlocked, but I knew it wasn’t random.

I never knew what happened to Joshua, number eighteen, or Mr. Hemmingworth, but they never returned. No one came to collect the money, no one came to investigate, no one cares what happened in the Shires Insane Asylum.

I prayed to God because that everybody was safe. I had money, enough to buy Shires Insane Asylum. And, unlike Mr. Hemmingworth’s rule, everybody would happy.

I prayed that everybody *would be* safe. I prayed that happiness could rain down upon this building. I prayed that people would be heard. My heart beat to the rhythm of the Lord’s Prayer. I hoped deep within my heart, and for the first time, God had a *good* point to prove.