

The Blake County Quarantine

by Julia Mornini

Marine del Rey crashed through the door breathless. She looked frazzled as hell.

"Lina!" she shouted. "I've got some bad news, dear."

It took me a second to get my bearings and respond. I was in the middle of work on my computer, sitting on the sofa. "Y-yeah? What?"

"There's a confirmed case of the frog flu in Blake County. Sheriff Bjørn is planning on announcing a stay-at-home order as soon as tomorrow."

The frog flu. News media had called it that from the start, but it infected humans easily, and barbed foxes were known to be a carrier as well. It was spreading all over the country, and due to its high mortality rate cities had started to shut down. People had wanted to believe that Blake County was too remote and sparsely-populated to be threatened, but in reality, I think most everyone knew it was only a matter of time.

"Fuck. You know who it was?" I asked.

"Supervisor Michaels. He called in sick this morning and they had him tested."

"Ha! Screw that guy. He's been opposing testing for weeks."

"Yes, but still..."

"Yeah yeah, I know. Wrong attitude or whatever. It's a problem for everyone now." I lied back and sighed.

"You know, it's not like I get out much, anyways." I chuckled.

Marine sat down on the sofa next to me. "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do, dear." She lied back, staring up at the ceiling. "I doubt there will be Board of Supervisors meetings for me to deliver supplies to."

"God, yeah, I hope you're OK," I replied. "Relieved I can still work from home."

She lied back, looking up at the ceiling. "Ugh... I can cover my part of rent for this month, at least. Might have to ask my family for help if it keeps up."

I nodded. "It's not looking good right now."

"You got paper towels the other day, right?" Marine asked.

"Yep. Kitchen cabinet," I said. "The shelves were already half-empty."

Marine just rolled her eyes. "Why are people like this? It's not like stores are going to close."

I nodded. "I hope not. I should probably talk to Sheila and see if she's gonna keep the store open."

"Wouldn't blame her if she can't, dear. It's going to be a long couple of weeks," Marine said.

"Or longer," I replied.

A lot longer.

Day 1 of Quarantine

I checked the news first thing in the morning that next day to watch the official lockdown announcement from Sheriff Bjørn. It was pretty much what I expected – he was always a slow talker who was seemingly incapable of getting right to the point.

Whatever. This was good, I guess. Non-essential businesses shutting down, restaurants required to offer takeout only, stay six feet away from people at all times. Not so hard when Blake County was so sparsely populated in the first place.

When I left my room and saw Marine using the coffee machine, her hair was frizzy and she had bags under her eyes.

"Oh, Lina," she said, half-asleep. "Good morning, dear."

"You alright?" I asked.

"I barely got any sleep last night, but other than that, yes."

"What happened?"

"Not looking forward to being stuck inside for all this time, dear. I need that fresh desert air." She frowned, slumping back against the counter.

"Could still go to the store if you want," I said.

"Going to the store," Marine said, "is not the same as driving through the desert in my convertible." She took a large swig of coffee and slammed her mug down on the counter.

"It's something, though," I said. I wanted to reassure her but I didn't feel at all assured myself.

"I suppose." She was staring off into space now.

"Alright, well, I'm going to call Sheila." Marine waved dismissively and I walked back to my room. I flopped down on my bed and called up Sheila.

She sounded relieved when she took the first breath into her phone's microphone. "Lina, Lina! It's so good to talk to you, you heard about the quarantine?"

"Of course, I was gonna ask you the same question! Are you gonna keep the store open?"

"I think so. People need stuff, you know? I've got a big stock of toilet paper here. I can handle it."

"That's great to hear. I might stop by tomorrow or the next day, OK?"

"Yes! I'd love to see you! Anything I could hold onto for you? Are you gonna be OK staying with Marine?" She always had a never-ending series of questions in these kinds of situations.

"Yeah, I'll be good. Though, uh, she's not doing too great. Are you OK on your own?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm used to it, don't worry! I've got a whole backlog of movies to watch, and a store to run!" she said.

"That's good!" My eyes widened as I thought of something. "Have you seen the Dark One recently, by the way? He must still be getting food from somewhere."

Sheila's tone changed; she sounded frazzled. "Oh, y-yeah, I forgot to tell you. He came by last week to buy a load of groceries. He didn't say anything, he just handed me a written list over the counter. Was kinda terrifying."

"I imagine," I said. "I feel kinda terrible for making you deal with that."

"Hey, no one got hurt!" Sheila said. "You've gotta take care of yourself!"

"Thanks," I said. We hung out on the phone in silence for a few moments.

"Alright, I'll talk to you later, OK?" I continued.

"Sounds good, Lina. Thanks for calling! I'll see you tomorrow or the next day, OK? Stay safe!" Sheila, cheerful and fast-paced as ever, hung up the phone. I lied back on the bed and looked up at the ceiling, wondering if anything I'd done had been right, and unable to imagine the quarantine ever ending even after only a day.

Day 2 of Quarantine

Waking up that next day was shitty. I looked outside from my bedroom window, well-rested and comfortable. Sunlight was shining onto the wooden floor of my room, and it made me want to go on a walk.

Then I remembered – you weren't supposed to go outdoors during a quarantine. Ugh. This was gonna be a hell of a month. Or longer. Medical authorities seemed to think this was gonna go on longer than the government was willing to admit.

I walked out into the living room to find Marine passed out on the couch.

"Oh..." she said, looking up, all groggy. "Hey, Lina. What time is it?"

"11," I responded.

"Ugh. I was up until 5 AM. This isn't going to be good for my sleep schedule, dear."

I chuckled nervously and flopped down on the sofa next to her. "Uh, yeah. Me neither."

Day 4 of Quarantine

"Are you alright, honey?" my mom asked. "I've been worried sick about you!"

"I'm fine, Mom... I'm fine," I said, nodding along even though she couldn't see me over the phone. Talking to her was always the same, but it was worse than usual when she had reason to be concerned about me.

"Were you able to get toilet paper, honey?" she said. "I heard they're running out of stock there! Your father wanted me to let you know that he'd come by if you needed some. We've got a big supply here."

"Yeah, us too. We're covered on toilet paper, don't worry," I said. "We've got a whole pack of 24."

"That's good, that's good. It's all so ridiculous."

"Yeah, panic buying is annoying." I leaned my head back against the couch cushion.

"The entire quarantine is annoying, sweetie! I'm worried they're going to implement one here in Maloney County too. I do not know if your father and I could handle that. I don't know if the company can handle it – our sales have been hurt so much by this whole thing! I'm surprised you're holding up at all!"

I put my hand on my face. I had no idea how to respond to this kind of nonsense. "I'm... Mom... I'm OK. I-I don't want to get in trouble with the police or something for going outside too much."

"Alright, sweetie, if you say so." I could imagine her shaking her head at me like I was some stubborn kid as if I was in the room with her. "But remember that you always

have a place here at home! You can always come by to visit or stay whenever you need. That roommate of yours has a car, doesn't she?" she said.

"OK, Mom, thank you. I'll... talk to you soon, OK? I need to go shopping."

"Alright, honey. Do you want me to put your father on the phone? He'd love to talk to you."

"I've really gotta go right now, Mom. Tell Dad I'll call him back sometime soon, OK?" I winced at that last statement.

"OK. Talk to you later, sweetie. Don't forget to let us know what's up with you! We worry!"

I hung up and slumped back against the couch cushion again. I didn't really need to go shopping – Marine and I had gone together yesterday.

Day 9 of Quarantine

I had finally caved to my parents' texts and called my dad just to get it over with.

"I'll talk to you later, OK, He—mm, Lina? Sorry," he said. I couldn't believe he still got my name wrong after all this time.

"Yeah, alright, have a good day, Dad." I took my phone off of my ear.

Marine, sitting in the kitchen, gave me a look and rubbed her fingers together in the way that one does to indicate money. I widened my eyes at her and shook my head vigorously. She shrugged, looking disappointed, and I hung up the phone.

"Please, you've got to consider asking your parents for help!" she said. "We really could use a restock on food right now."

"I'm telling you, Marine, we've got ramen to last us a couple of weeks, we've got fast food, we've got pizza, I can cover us with money from work! I'm not calling my parents and asking them for cash! You do that if you like, but for me, it's not happening," I said. I was clutching the couch's arm rest.

"Why not? They could help so much! I can hear them offering to do this!"

"Because I have never relied on them, Marine! Not since I got out of high school! I'm not gonna start tacitly approving of my mom's money-grubbing bullshit just so we can get a few extra pizza toppings and live better than everyone else just 'cause my parents are rich!"

"I never understood this about you, Lina. Your mom is a hero!"

"No, no, no! She is not a hero, Marine! She is just a regular-ass woman who got lucky enough to strike a huge deposit of blue metal while drilling for oil! If anyone's a hero, it's her goddamn employees! She doesn't do shit. She just sits around in her air-conditioned office from 9 to 5 while her minions dig up and refine all that shit!"

Marine sighed and paused for a moment. "Lina... your parents can help. Even if that's all true... they care about you."

"Care about me?" I asked. "Marine, they care about the *idea* of me. My mom has never tried to understand my political views and my dad still gets my name wrong half the time. I came out when I was 17!"

"I...I'm sorry. I'm just saying..." Marine stuttered.

"You what? You just wish my parents and I could be one, big happy family juuust like you and your brother and your good old mom and dad!"

I stormed into my bedroom in tears and slammed the door.

Only later did I realize that getting into a fight with my roommate when we were stuck inside with each other 24/7 was probably a bad idea.

Day 15 of Quarantine

Over two weeks now. And for nearly half of that, Marine and I hadn't talked beyond what was necessary. We nodded at each other, asked when the other would be done with the kitchen or whatever. But I was horribly lonely.

"Yeah. I watched the entire first season of Love City last night," I said.

"Isn't that show supposed to suck?" Sheila asked, over the phone.

"Oh, it's terrible. I guess it's just nice to see people, you know, interacting with each other."

Sheila laughed. "I get that."

"How are you doing?" I asked. "I've got to call you more often these days."

"I'm OK. Worried I'm gonna get infected. Some dude came into the store yesterday without a mask sniffing up a storm. Terrifying, honestly."

"Oh god. You're wearing gloves and stuff, right?"

"Yep. Mask too. I'm doing all I can."

"That's good."

"How about you, Lina? You talked to Marine yet?"

I sighed. "Nope. Been tense as hell. God... what's it like having a good family? I don't understand it."

"I dunno. What's it like having a bad one? Sounds like it sucks," she responded.

I laughed. "You can count on that. Like, my family's not *terrible*, you know? Marine's right, in a way. They do care about me, but they don't, uh, understand me. They've never appreciated me for my aspirations. They just want me to be, you know, the child they thought they had. They try, but they just... can't. And then there's all my mom's blue metal shit. When I was in high school, it was just kind of cool, you know, people always being like 'your mom is amazing!'. Growing up, you remember, before all that, we just kind of lived in that shitty apartment...suddenly my parents had a lot of money, and it seemed like a good thing, but it just drove us apart. Seemed like she was holding the world hostage for financial gain. If she could fix the environment, do it for free! But of course she didn't. Of course she didn't."

"You should tell her all this," Sheila said.

"My mom? Hell no," I responded. "Off the table."

"No, no, I mean Marine," she clarified.

I sighed again, lying back on my bed again. Didn't really feel comfortable to lie on it any way at this point. "You're right. It's just hard."

"Yeah, but I bet you can do it. Considering all you've been through!" she said.

Sometimes it felt like Sheila was the only person who really understood me in all the world. "Maybe I can," I said.

Day 20 of Quarantine

It was oddly comforting to me to see Marine in shambles just like me. I hadn't seen her in her hat and sunglasses for a week or so. It was weird as hell.

I looked like shit too, without a doubt, as I walked out into the living room. I hadn't showered in three or four days at this point, I couldn't remember exactly how long. That was a bad idea in this desert heat. Marine was lying there on the couch, scrolling through shows to stream on the TV.

"Hey, Marine," I said.

She looked up at me, no doubt surprised to be hearing my voice. "Hey, Lina." I was pretty sure she hadn't showered in a couple of days either, judging by the state of her curly brown hair.

"I just wanted to apologize..." I started.

She stood up and staggered a bit, probably due to lack of sleep. "Say no more," she responded, and she hugged me.

I was taken aback for a second. "You're not mad at me?"

"No, no, dear, I'm not mad... I just didn't know how to approach you. I thought you'd still be mad at me, honestly. I shouldn't have pressured you like that. I'm sorry."

"Thanks..." I said. She was still holding me.

"I don't really know what it's like," Marine said. "That kind of relationship with your parents... given what you've been through with them, I can hardly blame you for wanting to keep your distance from them."

"At least six feet," I said. We both laughed.

"Well, you and I aren't doing a very good job of that, are we, dear?" She let me go.

"We're roommates, it's probably fine."

"I suppose, dear," she said. "Well, would you like to browse streaming with me?"

"That sounds great. Let's order a pizza later, OK?"

She nodded, and we sat down together, me resting against her shoulder a little.

The quarantine wasn't gonna be so bad so long as I had someone to share it with.