

Meanwhile, Back in China

#5 –Genre: Biography, 901 words

Virginia Haynie Gause

Virginia Haynie Gause is a retired UTRGV librarian who worked fifty years in libraries. She is a prolific photographer and an aspiring travel writer. With her husband, George, she co-wrote two self-published booklets—a cookbook and a tour guide to Oaxaca. For six years the duo co-authored Texas and Mexico travel articles for the now defunct *Mesquite Review*. She founded the ArtsRGV community calendar in 2006 to promote arts and culture within the four counties of the Rio Grande Valley.

A devotee of Asian studies and particularly Chinese tea culture, she was planning her second trip to tour Chinese tea farms when COVID-19 changed everyone’s travel plans for 2020. She wanted to be part of this writing series to meet other Valley writers and to have a story published in *The Monitor*.

Mary jumped when the phone toned, “What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?”
“Oh,” she sighed, recognizing her neighbor’s number. “Why is Mrs. Vargas calling me now?”

“Hi, Mrs. Vargas, how are you?” Mary greeted in a chirpy voice.

“Doing better this morning. A little bird told me you’re busy sewing masks,” Mrs. Vargas responded. “Don’t make any for me, Mary, because my college sweetheart, Michael, just sent me an N95 mask from Hong Kong. It arrived in today’s mail. and is made of sexy black lingerie fabric and has three pairs of spare filters. It looks like something a lady on a Harley would wear because it closes with Velcro at the back of my neck.”

“That was awfully nice of Michael. Now you can go to the store when you need to. Did he give you any clues as to lessons learned from Hong Kong’s experience with the virus?” Mary asked.

“Yes, he did. He told me Hong Kong politicians managed the virus well by taking quick action to shutter businesses and isolate in the early stages; therefore, their numbers have been comparatively low. And, he told me he was attending a conference in Wuhan in January when the top brass in China finally admitted it was struggling against a monstrous new virus which has no cure,” Mrs. Vargas related excitedly.

“My stars,” gasped Mary. “Did Michael succumb to the virus?”

“No, miraculously he never did, although he said he has lost 15 friends in Hubei, one in Hong Kong, and five in New York! And, he has been tested on numerous occasions.”

“It must be great to live in a country where the first cycle of COVID-19 has already peaked,” Mary added.

“Yep, and I am really excited because Michael says if I live through this pandemic year, he will fly to Texas to see me.” Mrs. Vargas added, “It has been 35 years since we split up, but he says he still has my sophomore photo on his desk!”

“Well, who knows what may happen if he comes to Texas, Mrs. Vargas! I might lose a good neighbor,” Mary surmised.

“Ha, fat chance of that! I am no spring chick anymore, but I would like to see him again and hear about his world travels. Well, sweet neighbor, I just wanted to say hello. I’ll let you get back to your work.”

After disconnecting, Mary gathered the dirty towels in her hamper and took them to her laundry area. Noting she was almost out of laundry detergent she set the washing machine in motion and returned to the living room.

She flicked through Facebook on her phone and glanced at press conferences of the Texas governor and the latest of the four county judges in the Rio Grande Valley. She raked through press releases mentioning her hero, Dr. Anthony Fauci, and wondered what it would be like to do important work with him all the time.

Grabbing a bottle of water, she moved her laptop to a table overlooking her patio. Seeing her small grouping of potted plants on her thumbnail patio calmed her.

“There is something about seeing green which makes one feel alive,” she thought.

She brought up her bank account from the previous month on her laptop to see which bills were due soon. Her balance looked good. Since she was not going to spend any money in San Antonio, she looked up airfares to San Francisco. Maybe she should try to visit her former college roommate, Elly, who worked there. San Francisco was definitely on her bucket list and Elly had been trying to get her out to the West Coast even before they had graduated from UT Austin. She and Elly could take Caltrain down to San Diego for fun.

Once this pandemic was over, she wanted to turn over a new leaf and take some longer trips.

Her mind wandered back to another classmate—Jing Liu. Wasn’t Jing Liu originally from Shanghai? Or was it Beijing? She zipped off a quick text to find out if Elly had kept in touch with Jing Liu.

“I’ve got to stop daydreaming,” Mary told herself. Quickly, she brought up her university email. To her shock she found three emails from her boss, each more insistent about a work assignment she had previously given Mary. She had been assigned to come up with five well-thought-out ideas on how to find creative talent when hiring workers. Mary dreaded the assignments because her boss gave them when there were no openings in her department. There had been none in the past three years of the university’s hiring freeze!

Mary mumbled to herself in frustration. “Why couldn’t she give me a more practical assignment such as making masks for the international students who would be seeking alternative housing if the campus dormitories closed?” Rumors she had heard suggested they might.

Mary was about to log on to a business periodical database when her cell phone rang again. It was her boss’s administrative assistant whose voice was shaky and oddly strained.

“Mary,” she said, “I have some sad news for you. Our boss was on her way to the store this morning when a texting driver rear-ended her at a high speed. She died on the way to the hospital.” She hesitated as Mary gasped. “I guess *you* will be the new head of our department now.”