

“De Ja Vu”  
# 16 Genre: Historical Fiction, 986 words  
By Madhavi Reddy

*Madhavi Reddy calls Brownsville home though she was born and raised in South India. She enjoys working on eyes, playing with words, and planting trees. Beyond her day job of being an ophthalmologist, she loves writing poetry in English and her native language, Telugu, telling stories, and volunteering as an eye surgeon all over the world. Madhavi shares her experiences through writing travelogues about the remote places where she has worked. She is excited to venture into the world of fiction with the inspiring and eclectic “Let’s Write a Story” group of writers from the Rio Grande Valley.*

Mary rubbed her temples, trying to make sense of recent events: the freak fatal accident involving Sylvia, followed by the mystery of the Golden Sassafras, Michael, Forest, the nefarious scheme she witnessed at Cine El Rey, the Old Man, and the intriguing nature spirits. Overwhelmed, she had returned home after extracting a promise from Twix and Forest to come to her rescue whenever she needed them.

“Maybe I can somehow save Sylvia, or perhaps the whole world, from COVID19, if I can just clear my head,” she thought. “I need a good night’s rest and someone I trust to talk to about all this.” She knew who that person was—Twix had reminded her with the question, “Do you have a boyfriend?”

Outside her window, the sun was dipping behind the trees at the edge of the arroyo and the ever-chirping purple martins were settling down for the night. As she lay in bed, her overactive mind wandered back to John, her ex-boyfriend, and to that fateful night at her favorite French restaurant in San Antonio. All through their relationship, she had been happy with him, thinking of him constantly, certain that he was the one for her. She had been sure he was going to propose to her that evening.

As dessert arrived, he had leaned in, saying, “I have something important to tell you.”

She could barely suppress her excitement. “Go on...”

“I enlisted in the Army.”

She couldn’t breathe. She blurted out, “What...what do you mean, you enlisted?” It felt like a bomb had exploded inside her. The pressure worked its way into her voice.

“I thought we had something special, that we were going to spend a lifetime together!”

She didn’t care about how loud her voice was becoming, or that the other diners were staring at them.

John reached over and took her hand. “Babe, I love you, but this is something I want to do for my country and myself before we settle down.”

Pulling her hand back, Mary shouted, “I can’t imagine us being away from each other even for a day. There’s no way this can work out!”

“Babe, please. Listen to me.”

Despite his pleading, she had stormed out of the restaurant. Mary never talked to John again, ignoring his texts and eventually blocking his number. She never discussed what happened with anyone, not even with Sylvia, her best friend. As she lay there, all the tender feelings she had for John surfaced. She regretted the way she reacted; she should have been supportive of his plans. As her eyes slowly closed, she thought he might help her solve this mystery; she would find a way to contact him the next morning. Soon, she fell asleep, slipping into a dream, smelling the gentle fragrance of sandalwood incense she had lit to calm her nerves.

*Stumbling over the unfamiliar cobblestones, Mary walked past piles of rubble, looking at the buildings on either side of the street, walls torn, windows shattered by the constant shelling. It was the summer of 1918; the air reeked of smoke and gasoline as the trucks packed with soldiers rolled by. She was beginning to feel faint, she hadn't eaten anything as she had caught the bus from Paris to Chateau Thierry early in the morning. Not finding any trace of John at the chaotic US Army headquarters, she decided to look in the hospital for him. She recalled his last letter, describing how intense the fighting was and how much he missed her. She wasn't sure if he received her reply, saying that she had joined the Red Cross as a nurse and was stationed in France.*

*Rounding a corner, she saw a large, white tent next to the red brick building which served as the Army hospital. She walked up to an orderly and asked if there were any soldiers from the 92nd Infantry Division. He directed her to his supervisor, Sister Eleanor. A nun with a tired face and kind eyes, she told Mary to wait outside while she checked the records for a Pfc. John Daniels. Fidgeting anxiously on the bench, Mary couldn't help but notice hundreds of patients with Spanish Flu, crammed into the tent. In Paris, she had seen it afflict young soldiers in droves, making them gasp for breath, turning them blue before they succumbed to the terrible illness. There was nothing anyone could do except make the patients as comfortable as possible, and protect themselves from catching it by wearing masks and washing hands. Some said the American soldiers brought it to Europe from Kansas and others believed it originated in Asia. Who knows? All she wanted was to find her dear John, safe and sound!*

*One of the soldiers outside the tent approached her, “Mademoiselle, would you like some coffee?” She took the tin cup thankfully, mumbling a “merci beaucoup.”*

*“What are you doing here?”*

*“I'm a nurse with the Red Cross, looking for my boyfriend, John. I haven't heard from him in weeks, and I'm beginning to fear the worst.” She choked back tears. As they sat, the sun dipped behind the trees at the edge of the Marne, setting the sky ablaze with shades of orange to rival any painter's palette.*

*Both of them looked up, lost for a moment in the timeless beauty of nature. The soldier*

*smiled at her.*

*“No matter what happens, don't forget to be grateful for the time you spent with him. Love will save us in the end.” Mary looked up and gasped as she recognized his face.*

*Suddenly, a loud, shrill sound blared and Mary ducked instinctively, thinking it was an air raid.*

As she lost her balance and fell off the bench, she woke up from the dream, heart pounding.

Her eyelids flew open and Mary found herself on the floor, next to the bed, with the sun streaming through the blinds, her phone ringing urgently!