

Time to Reflect
17, Genre: Fiction, 974 words
Shirley Rickett

Mary sat up, groggy from the dream, and looked in the direction of her ringing cell, aware now it was John's face she had seen in the dream.

"Hello?"

"Mary? My Mah—ree?"

"Elly! Ohmigosh!"

"Still working in South Texas? Same job? Same boyfriend? Kids?" The staccato questions took one breath.

"All but the last two." It was Elly! Elly in the dorm, Elly washing her ash blond hair every day. She and Elly at the karaoke bar singing, *I'm an old cowhand / from the Rio Grande ... and ma legs ain't ...*

"Question is, Elly, how are *you*? Heard you were ill."

"Just a little heart murmur. Nothing to get excited about. But it's enough to keep Dr. Rothchild away. I think he's an imposter, Mary. I've done some web surfing and his resume doesn't match with the facts about his background."

"But . . . I would think if he contracted with Dr. Fauci, he would have been fully vetted. When you and Jing Lui interned at that lab you said he was creepy even then during the few times he came in. Why? Do you think he may be a threat? When he came to my house with Mrs. Vargas, a neighbor, long story, he asked about the Golden Sassafras flower that should have been hanging on the wall, and he knew darned well it had been. The empty space on the wall was obvious, but it could have been some other picture missing. And he said in such a tone, *where is it?* So demanding."

"Some things are going on ... listen, let's do skype sometime or right now."

"OK, how about tomorrow night about 7? I need a little space right now."

"Works for me. See you tomorrow, love. Bye."

"Bye Elly. So good to hear your voice."

Mary donned sweats and pulled her long dark hair into a pony tail. She looked in the mirror. No makeup. Hadn't even washed her face. Her reflection jarred her for a moment. Her clear, lucent skin had turned pale, sallow. She headed for the couch, the remote, and recordings of her favorite series, recordings stacked up because of work and her workaholic self. She could no longer abide the "news." There used to be a big story each week or so, followed by wall to wall coverage. Then once a day and sometimes, now, hour by hour. It felt like living inside a deck of cards being shuffled, expecting them to be dealt, but they are shuffled again and again. Or was that feeling from the events of the last few weeks?

She rolled off the couch and made a quick path to the freezer before she could change her mind. HEB. Bunnytracks. She opened the plastic tub and dug in. Was John dead? She didn't even know where he was. Would she ever have a social life again? Would she ever have a life? Could she

die from this pandemic? More people died than thought possible a few short weeks ago. Children. Now so-called rare cases were becoming prevalent. Horrible red splotchy skin, high fever for days, sometimes vomiting, cardiac conditions, really sick young kids. She was glad not to be married and have children. Young people, teens, people my age! She picked up her cell.

“Hello?”

“Dad ... Daddy? It’s Mary.” She sucked in a breath.

“Well, hello, my darlin’! Are you all right?”

“In the pink ... but I miss Mom and ...”

“Oh, so you called your old dad? Yeh, second choice.”

“Not second choice, you’re the only choice now.” They both laughed.

“I’m sorry I haven’t taken time to call much lately. Everything is out of kilter with this pandemic. I just wanted to make sure you are well.”

“Oh, yeh, me, I’m makin’ it. Got a couple of hands to help around plantin’ and harvest times. I’m healthy as a horse, getting’ older ... think about your Mom every day. This house holds her in every room.”

Mary began to sob. She couldn’t stop. Quiet on the other end until the torrent slowed. She recovered in spotty stages, gasping for breath like one who had been under water.

“I’m in need of something, Dad. I can’t seem to decipher what it is or how I’ll get it.”

“Ohhh, me darlin’ take your time. Are you sittin’ down?”

“I am now. On my patio.”

“Good.”

Mary thought of one of those bridges made of rope and tree trunks and vines strung across a great chasm. She felt as if she were in an old Tarzan movie sitting in the middle of one of those bridges looking down.

“Darlin,’ do you remember our road trip to visit Aunt Lottie? You were but a little tyke.”

“I was nine.”

“Went through Abilene, Kansas, where old Ike was born and raised. It was a soft summer night and you were in the back seat with your head leaned against the window staring at the sky.

“Yes.”

“You told me to stop the car, ‘Right now, Daddy!’ I never saw so many stars you said. There must be hundreds, you said, and I laughed and said, millions, billions! And I told you how you could see so many because of no city lights, no manmade lights. And we stopped and you jumped out at the edge of a field. Then it happened. You saw the milky way! You recognized it! And you were stunned as someone who bought a pig in a poke when I told you, that’s *our* galaxy. We are in it right now!”

Mary could see it. She could smell the green and dirt of the field.

“That, me darlin’ is forever. You can carry that with you wherever you go. That’s bigger than any problems down here.”

The only sound was a mockingbird in the grapefruit tree. A lone car rumbled by.

“Thanks, Dad. I love you.”

Shirley Rickett has been writing longer than she cares to remember. She holds an MA in Education and an MA in English Literature, University of Missouri—Kansas City. She and husband Charles left their lifetime home in Kansas City to retire to South Texas in 2006. She is the author of poems in three chapbooks and a full length book of poems, *Transplant*, FlowerSong Books. One of her poems was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize published in *Boundless*, the annual VIPF (Valley International Poetry Festival) anthology. She wanted to be a part of this project to enjoy the company of other writers.