

The Mystery Continues
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Dora Gonzalez is a freelance illustrator and writer. She is currently working on *Rise of the Dragons*, a YA fantasy story. Her works have been published both online and in print format. They range from flash fiction to online serializations. She is part of the RGV Writer's Connection, and decided to be part of this serialization because she enjoys writing and learning alongside other authors. She was born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley.

Mary could hear a soft, yet constant, beeping echo in her ears.

Beep, beep, beep.

She tried to open her eyes and grab a sense of the sound, but her lids felt heavy. She tried again, moving her hand up to her face to press her fingers against her temple. The sound seemed to get louder yet quieter at the same time, each fluctuation bringing a sharp pain to the side of her head where her fingers touched.

After a moment, she managed to open her eyes and caught her breath.

She was in a white room with many machines and equipment which were producing the beeping sounds.

Her gaze moved from the strange equipment around the room to her hand, which felt heavy and wrong. She stared at the needle stuck in it. Her gaze quickly moved back to the room, familiar now, and in an instant Mary knew where she was.

She was in a hospital, in one of their "special" rooms.

But why was she at the hospital?

Mary tried to recall what happened but all she remembered was that frightening visit at 5:30 in the morning. How Michael and Ella, Elly, had practically barged into her home demanding she hand over the Golden Sassafras and then the pounding on the door after they left.

Who visited after them?

She could not recall, no matter how much she tried. The pain in her temple increased the more she pondered on the missing memories. With a heavy sigh Mary looked more slowly around the room again and noticed the discarded medical suits in a bin. Those discarded items seemed scarier than the empty, white, medical room and the vast loneliness she felt in it.

Mary forced her attention elsewhere, seeking the clock on the wall, above the lone window. Its small black hands pointed at 3:00. There was daylight so it must be afternoon, but what day was it?

Where was John? Where was Sylvia and Grace?

All Mary could do was stare at the clock and watch the seconds slowly pass away. When the clock failed to trigger any memories, she tried to shift on the bed. Her fingers grazed something on her side and, reaching for it, she found the call unit. Mary looked at the set of buttons and pressed the help button with renewed hope. Soon a person covered from head to toe in medical attire, a face mask and gloves, opened the door and entered.

The soft ruffling of the blue material seemed to threaten the new-found hope Mary had only moments ago.

"I see you are finally awake, Mary. Can I call you Mary?" a somewhat muffled female voice spoke.

Mary tried to speak but her throat felt tight and itchy, the only sound she made was a low

raspy breath. She nodded instead.

“My name is Sam and I am your nurse for today. Your friends will be happy to hear you are awake,” the nurse continued, as if she knew what was on Mary’s mind. “I know you must have many questions and they will all be answered in due time. For now, I will ask the questions and you can nod if it is yes and shake your head for no.”

Mary nodded and blinked a couple of times, trying to fight back the fear in her mind. Had she contracted the virus? Had COVID-19 finally laid its deadly grasp on her life span and decided to cut it short? Mary swallowed and ignored the rapid beating in her chest. The nurse would explain everything, she had to be patient.

“Are you finding it hard to breath?” the nurse broke the silence after writing on her chart.

Mary shook her head.

“Are you feeling any swelling in your chest, more precisely in your lungs?”

Again, Mary shook her head.

The nurse wrote on the chart and then took out a thermometer. “No, fever,” she said after the apparatus beeped. “That’s good.”

The nurse did one final check on the equipment around the room and gave Mary a smile, a smile that Mary never saw but knew was there due to the shift in the thin blue facemask.

As Mary saw the nurse getting ready to leave, panic kicked in again. The need for answers, to fill in the gap in her mind, was too much to bear.

“What happened? Why am I in the hospital? Do I have the virus?” she cried out in a half-raspy half-screeching voice.

“I will call your friends and we can go from there,” the nurse replied. She reached for the doorknob and Mary felt her life come to an abrupt halt. Just as tears welled up in her eyes and blurred her vision, the nurse turned around. “As for the virus, all tests have come back negative.” With that, she left.

Mary was safe, she could relax. With her fear lifted, she continued to ponder the events before that last pounding on her door which seemingly led her here.

What exactly was the Golden Sassafras? Had the two days already passed? Had Michael gotten his dirty hands on it after all? Had Grace failed her mission to stop them from making an old-time snake oil remedy? Who was taking care of Gidget and Zues, her Rat Terriers? And foremost if she did not have the COVID-19, why was she in the hospital and in such a room?

All the questions swirled in her mind along with all the places and times she had visited, the Cine El Rey, Gizmo’s, the small, family-owned café, the trip back in time to September 2019. What stuck in her mind the longest was that weird dream she had had of Summer of 1918. Something about it tugged at the back of her mind and Mary wondered if she was starting to go crazy.