

Pandemic, Old and New
#23 Fiction, 963 words
By Barbara Ertl

The tugging continued at the back of Mary's mind after she was cleared to leave the hospital. She had been given stern directions as to nourishment and rest, and warned about weakening her immune system further while a pandemic raged. Remembering the meals she skipped and her sleepless nights worrying, she vowed to do better. Grace seemed to have the Golden Sassafras case in hand and John called every day. Sylvia wanted desperately to see her but was always turned away.

Mary couldn't explain fainting the morning Michael frightened her. She was still on her feet when he left. It was when John opened the door to reveal Old Man and Sylvia's nature spirit mother, Linda, she fainted. Sylvia said they couldn't rouse her and when they realized how warm she felt, they feared the virus. After calling 911, they followed her ambulance. Fever was the magic word and she was examined within minutes of entering the ER.

Sylvia, Grace, and John were sent home and wouldn't be allowed to see Mary at the hospital. They had been advised to call after tests had been run and the doctors were satisfied with her condition. They found, while she didn't have the virus, she was run down and anemic. The doctors warned she was ripe for infection and to take better care of herself. She was discharged quickly, for her own sake, as well as their need of the bed.

Everyone was delirious with joy, especially John, when she was home at last and ensconced on the living room sofa, being waited on like a queen. Mary quickly turned the celebrating into a Sassafras conference.

"What's been going on?" John was perched on the arm of the sofa and she reached over to catch his wrist. "What's happened with Michael? And Old Man?" Without waiting for an answer, she turned to Sylvia. "Tell me about—"

"Slow down, girl! All in good time." Grace came in the front door in time to hear Mary's inquisition. "I come bearing food and you're going to eat it. The doctor was right. You're too thin and have been worrying too much." She continued on into the kitchen with a savory smelling dish.

"If you don't tell me what you know, I *am* going to worry." Mary tried to look solemn. "You don't want me doing that."

John slid off the arm to sit beside her. "Grace and I have things in good shape. We're waiting on information from other folks but for now, we know where Michael and Jing are and what they're doing. We're watching closely for his next move."

"Okay, I'll accept that." Mary smiled at him. "Now, how is Sylvia's mother? I did see her with Old Man before I nosedived, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. They made a nature-sprite combo, sitting back quietly, observing, and only speaking when it was important. Their serenity in the midst of our chaos was beneficial.

Sylvia took them home with her when we didn't know how long you'd be in the hospital." John chuckled. "Sylvia says Old Man wants her to plant tomatoes in her big backyard and maybe some cucumbers and zucchini. She has too much ground going to waste as lawn, he told her."

"That's great. Why did he come?"

Sylvia and John looked at each other. "You're going to love this," Sylvia replied. "He said he had to come because he knew you were going to need him. He went right to work preparing food and drink of all sorts, all very healthy, of course. The refrigerator and freezer are full of his goodies, waiting for you. Satisfied with the doctors warning to you and the food he had prepared, he has now gone home. Mother was delighted with his visit and will be here to see you soon."

"And before you begin worrying, Elly has been staying here. She's fine, and has been resting," John said.

"She's also been drinking Old Man's magic potions. Wait until you see her. She's glowing with good health," Sylvia grinned, "and feels like a new woman."

"How did Elly get here?" Mary exclaimed. "And there's the matter of the Golden Sassafras seeds which Henry and Aronia have and Michael wants"

"Elly's jumped ship. They forced her cooperation at first and when she realized how ruthless they were, she got out. As far as the Golden Sassafras seeds, Michael doesn't know who has them. You told him you don't, which is the important thing if he believes you. So far, he has stayed away. Grace has men watching him and the house and you needn't worry." John took her hand and looked into her eyes. "You're well protected."

"Thank you both. I feel safe." Mary sat up straighter. "I want to talk to you. A recent dream I can't explain has been tugging at me. The year was 1918 and the pandemic at that time was caused by Spanish flu, no vaccine, no cure. Remember it from your history?" Mary shifted nervously and looked at John. "In the dream I was a nurse, searching for you. Wounded, you were in a hospital, somewhere."

John now held both her hands, his eyes warm with love. "Go on."

"I was waiting for news when a soldier offered me coffee. We ended up watching a spectacular sunset together. It was a special moment, beautiful in the midst of such strife. He told me to be grateful for the time we had together, that love will save us in the end. I didn't recognize him at first. Then there was the terrible sound of a bomb coming in and . . ."

"And?" Sylvia whispered.

"I fell out of bed and woke up, feeling something terrible was coming."

Nobody doubted Mary's premonition, seeing her face turn bone-white.

A scribbler since grade school in Wisconsin, Barbara later wrote columns for the high school paper and for the local newspaper. She wrote feature articles and published a monthly newsletter for the medical auxiliary of a large Milwaukee hospital. Transplanting to Texas after retirement, she took most of Jan Seale's writing classes and joined Seale's writers' group. She

has been published in a Seale anthology.

Currently she has written two books for her own sense of accomplishment and is writing short stories in the Christian genre. Barbara also works as an editor for books and stories, as she in on these. She is enjoying the challenge of blending talents with other members of the RGV Writers' Connection and has found it to be good fun.