

A Fate Too Cruel
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Dora Gonzalez is a freelance illustrator and writer. She is the author of *The Five Kingdoms of Severi*, a YA fantasy novel and is currently working on the next book in the series, *Rise of the Dragons*. Her works have been published both online and in print format. They range from flash fiction to online serializations. She was born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley and currently lives with her son and rescued dog named Pita. Gonzalez decided to be part of this serialization because she enjoys writing and learning alongside other authors. She hopes to bring her own voice to this ever-evolving story.

Mary stared at the corner of the picture table, blood clinging to its sharp, broken edge, dripping to the floor with a mind of its own. Her eyes moved to her friend's unmoving form still cradled in her arms and panic spread through her ten-fold.

Her mind questioned over and over . . . *What do I do now?*

Mary glanced at her friend's unmoving eyes and forced herself to feel for a pulse. She simply wouldn't accept Sylvia could be dead. Her hand was shaking so hard she barely managed to press two fingers against the side of Sylvia's neck. She gasped. Was there a pulse? Maybe her friend was not dead, just unconscious. Yes, that was it. That *had* to be it.

An ambulance, she had to call 911.

Mary shuttered as she lay Sylvia back on the cold floor. Punching in 911 on her phone, she quaked with each number she pressed. As she was about to press the last number her phone slipped from her hands and fell to the floor with a loud splat. Mary reached for it and went still. Eyes widening in horror, she saw the phone lying in the growing pool of warm blood and her own blood-covered hands and arms. Her face turned ashen as her hand remained frozen, inches from the phone.

The sudden, forceful hacking sound her friend had made, that dreaded cough which still echoed in Mary's ears, amplified her fear. If Sylvia was infected it would be in her blood and that very blood now covered Mary's phone and clung to her every pore. Her entire body spasmed in pure terror and she fought to collect her thoughts.

What could she do? What should she do?

With her last ounce of sanity, she reached for the phone, pressed in the last number, and pushed 'talk.' She held the phone near her ear, careful not to press it against her face, and remembered to breath as the ringing started. It seemed to go on forever before a woman's voice answered.

"You've reached 911. How may I be of assistance?" the woman's calm, emotionless voice echoed in Mary's ear before the woman spoke again, "Hello, is everything all right?"

Mary took one final, deep breath and spoke "My friend, my friend hit her head and she's not moving. There's, there's a lot of blood."

"I'll send an ambulance right away. What is your address?" the composed voice asked, now almost a distant whisper against the banging in Mary's head.

"Ma'am, what is your location?"

Mary searched her memory for the information and spoke carefully, her voice cracking with each number and letter she gave.

“Stay calm and the ambulance will be there shortly. Please remain on the line until it does,” the woman said.

Mary could not bring herself to reply and pressed the end call button. The phone slipped back to the floor. She staggered to her feet and made her way to the kitchen sink. Starting to wash her hands, she watched as blood mixed with the water and swirled around the drain, refusing to dilute and wash away. She scrubbed harder between her fingers and under her nails, desperately needing to wash all the possibly infected blood away. Would her hands ever be clean enough?

After minutes, which seemed like hours, the sound of sirens reached Mary’s ears and she turned off the faucet. A banging on the door brought her back to the living room and on into the entryway. She unlocked the door and the paramedics rushed in. Doing her best to move out of their way and answer their questions, her eyes riveted on her motionless friend. Tears streamed down her face, clouding her vision. Panic seeped back in and shaking, she slid to the floor. There she remained as her friend was put on a stretcher and hurriedly taken away. The house seemed to empty of people as quickly as it had filled, and Mary could only wish it were a dream she would awaken from.

Yes, that was it. It was all just a dream. She would wake up tomorrow and find out the COVID-19 and her friend’s accident had been a horrid dream. She would call Sylvia and they would again talk about their trip.

A pair of black shoes stopped within her vision and Mary looked up to see a police officer. When Mary failed to stand, he knelt in front of her.

“Ma’am, I am going to need you to calm down and explain to me what happened.” The officer looked young, in his late 30’s. “Can you stand?” He stood himself and opened a notepad, the ruffling of paper filling the dead air.

Mary nodded and struggled to get up. Her hands rubbed on her pants.

“My friend Sylvia, that’s her name,” she said as she looked up. The officer was taller than her and she tried her best to make eye contact. “I opened the door when she knocked, but then she coughed and I panicked and pushed her away.” Her voice quivered and her hands started to sweat. Mary did not want to recall how she injured her friend, but knew she had to explain.

Was she a murderer? The memory of her friend’s blank eyes rushed back to her and she muffled a cry. No, she had felt a pulse, hadn’t she? All she had done was push her friend away. That was all. Was that a crime? Mary’s mind started to wander. The officer cleared his throat and she looked back at him.

“I don’t know if she was sick or weak due to some medication she was taking, but she stumbled and hit her head on the side of that picture table.”

With a trembling hand, Mary pointed at the table and leaned against the wall to keep herself upright. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. She just fell and hit her head,” Mary repeated before her voice gave out. She stared at the police officer hoping he would tell her she had not killed her friend; she was not a murderer. The officer remained silent as he wrote on his note pad.

“You will have to come down to the station to give your official statement,” the officer finally said as his partner, a young female officer, joined them.

“Is Sylvia really dead?” Mary asked and was met with silent stares from both officers.

The ambulance siren grew distant, then abruptly went silent. Mary had her answer.