

LONG ARM OF GOLDEN SASSAFRAS
#10-Genre: Mystery/Suspense/Fantasy, 985 words
By Brenda Lee Huerta

Mary's smile was as wide as Texas as she approached them. Her heart was super light after her "meeting" with Henry and Aronia.

"Thank you for waiting. I'm so sorry. It's just that I feel uncomfortable with company and not wearing a mask or gloves. My house was a mess. This COVID19 has turned my world upside down. I'm so sorry, here I am babbling away!"

Michael's smile, showing off stark white teeth against his bronzed skin, was enough to melt anyone's heart. "Totally understand," he said. His accent added a lot to those two words.

Flustered, Mary turned to Mrs. Vargas saying, "It's good to see you. I'm glad you brought Michael, or should I call him Dr. Rothschild?"

Michael answered, "Michael sounds good coming from you."

Mrs. Vargas reached out to hug her. Mary backed off. Her fear of COVID19 had only grown.

"That's ok, Mrs. Vargas, remember, social distancing."

Mrs. Vargas, embarrassed, said, "No worries, I forget." They headed back to Mary's house, admiring the colorful bougainvillea, hyacinths and ficus in full bloom in her yard.

"Please come in. Let me get some sweet tea and pan dulce. It's Mexican sweet bread, fresh from Lara's Bakery in Harlingen."

Mrs. Vargas clapped her hands in delight. "Michael, you're in for a treat, this pan dulce is to die for and something you can't get anywhere in Hong Kong!"

Mary hurried to the kitchen and placed everything on a beautiful silver platter Sylvia had given her years ago. Tears formed and she quickly wiped them away. She was going to miss her sidekick so much. Why had she pushed Sylvia away? How would she keep functioning with that guilt on her soul?

As she came around the corner from her kitchen, she stopped abruptly. Michael was in the living room, frowning at the wall, muttering, "Jing Liu said they had gotten a framed Golden Sassafras to share. The last one to have it was Mary. Where is it?"

Mary watched as he looked at the faded wall space where the Golden Sassafras frame had hung. Slowly she backed up, took the hallway toward the study, and found Mrs. Vargas rearranging the flowers next to the loveseat.

"Where's Michael?" Mary asked.

Michael came in. "I just went to the bathroom to wash my hands. That looks good. Perfect for a hot day like today."

Mary's hands shook a bit and she quickly placed the platter down on the side table. "Please, serve yourselves."

Michael took a bite of a pumpkin empanada and closed his eyes, then looked at Mrs. Vargas. "You were right, darling, so very delicious." He continued, "Mary, thank you. By the way, I noticed the abundant laurels at the side of the house. Reminds me of that beautiful Golden Sassafras I once saw at a hotel in San Antonio on a visit. I understand the owner of that hotel, which used to go by that name, gave you a token of their namesake."

Taken aback, Mary blurted out, "Who told you?"

Michael smoothly answered, "Oh, I think Elly, a friend of yours, mentioned it. You were college roommates, weren't you?"

With distrust, Mary replied, "I think it's in a box up in the attic. I hadn't thought about it in a long time." Checking her watch, she stood up. "Oh, my goodness, look at the time. I'm so sorry to hurry you, but I promised my office I would send the results of my project this afternoon. Would you excuse me?"

Mrs. Vargas and Michael stood up. "Of course. We didn't mean to take up so much of your time. The pan dulce and tea were the best! Will you call me tomorrow?" asked Mrs. Vargas.

"Of course, just as soon as I'm finished with the office." Mary walked to the door with them. Michael turned as she was closing the door and gave her a sharp look. Then he took Mrs. Vargas' arm as they started down the steps.

Slumping against the closed door, Mary took a deep breath. "Why did he say Ella was his friend, yet spoke about Jing Liu as he stared at the living room wall?" Mary resolutely straightened and said, "I have to do something!"

Without hesitation, she slipped into light meditation and called out to Henry and Aronia. "Come please, I need you."

Within a few minutes, the two sprites each tapped her on a shoulder. "Ye called?"

"Oh my, you startled me! Yes, I need to know. What is the significance of the Golden Sassafras? What about those seeds? I feel as if the world is closing in on me."

Henry and Aronia just looked at each other. "We mustn't burden you with what could harm you," they spoke in unison. Without another word, they evaporated into thin air.

Mary put her head in her hands. She felt so all alone. Why hadn't Elly responded to her text? Where was Jing Liu? Oh, she missed Sylvia so much. Why had Sylvia seemed in a panic when she left those texts? Who was "He"? What did she mean by, "He was coming after me next!"

Her afternoon was spent in tears, puzzlement, self-recrimination, and tears again. What did it all mean?

Finally, night came. She prepared for bed, praying that this pandemic would be over soon and a cure could be found. Why did she have this gut feeling Michael was after something, other than connecting with a long-lost love. She wondered about the framed Golden Sassafras, the 5 female seeds and the inscription intimating they had some sort of power. Why had the sprites spirited it away so quickly? What were they keeping from her? was her last thought as she drifted off to sleep.

A sleep that didn't last long, as a thud above her head awakened her. Frightened, Mary sat straight up in her bed, looked up and heard the thudding again.

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Brenda's careers have spanned media, military and government, sometimes intertwined. Her life has been dedicated to informing and advocating with a lot of success. She has won numerous accolades and awards throughout her careers. English and Spanish are her primary languages, serving her well during her lifetime. Brenda has spent many decades writing in soundbites. She wanted to be a part of this group to improve her writing skills and dabble in new frontiers. This is so much fun.