

Time to Catch Up  
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The spark was reigniting. Their dormant feelings, buried for years, were finding their way into the open. Mary and John found themselves inching closer and closer on the sofa, until they were practically hugging. Just having him sitting next to her calmed her fears. Gidget and Zues were resting comfortably on the thick floor rug, shooting an occasional, one-eyed glance at their mistress. Mary threw her arms around John after a contented sigh. She had not felt this happy and secure in months.

Sylvia was about to excuse herself and give some privacy to the reunited lovers, when the guest room door creaked open and a well-rested Elly bounded down the stairs with a broad smile on her pretty, round face.

Mary jumped up from the sofa. “Elly! You look great, surely better than the other morning.” She stopped herself from embracing Elly, remembering to socially distance because of her heart condition.

Elly grinned, “It is so uh... good to see you, Mary. You have lost weight but look as lovely as ever.”

John moved towards the edge of the sofa, making room for Elly.

“We, the ‘Fantastic Four,’ have so much to catch up on.” Elly stopped abruptly, noticing the pained expression on Sylvia’s face. An awkward pause followed, as the girls realized Jing’s absence and their mixed feelings for her. For a moment it had felt like the good old college days, when the four of them spent countless nights on Sixth Street arguing over boys. Now, the air hung heavy with unsaid words. Mary winced as she recalled the venom Jing had spewed about them at Cine El Rey.

John stood up. “I think it’s time for tea.” Grateful for the gesture, Mary smiled at him.

“That sounds perfect.”

After he stepped out of the room, Sylvia began, “We need to solve this mystery. Elly, do you mind updating Mary with what you shared with us earlier?”

Elly settled on the sofa after taking a freshly made Ginger-Moringa tea laced with lemongrass from John. Mary sipped her tea slowly, inhaling the delicate aroma as she readied herself for more twists and turns of the story. Although she had heard it earlier, Sylvia was still attempting to figure out why Jing had jumped ship to the dark side. Grace joined them too, quietly pulling up a chair.

Elly began. “As you both know, Jing and I joined an immunology lab at the University of California, San Francisco, right after college, that closely collaborated with Dr. Fauci’s lab at the NIH. One summer, we met Dr. Michael Rothschild, a charming, well-traveled virology professor, when we were working on a vaccine for the Ebola virus. His CV, curriculum vitae, like a doctor’s resume, was impressive with countless publications; he had completed his PhD in Sydney and did a postdoctoral fellowship in New York followed by stints in Europe and China. He had recently arrived from Hong Kong, where he had apparently worked with Chinese

scientists on another virus. He invited us out for drinks, to which we cheerfully agreed. While sharing entertaining stories from his travels, Michael would interject with detailed questions about our lab projects and protocols. At the time, we thought nothing of his curiosity, and if anything, we felt flattered by his attention.

“It was not until last year when Jing said she had run into him at a conference in Wuhan, China, that my suspicions began. Especially when she started questioning me, after she returned, about the Golden Sassafras picture we received from the owner of the Hotel Sassy in San Antonio. I had forgotten about it until she reminded me we were supposed to share it. Her behavior was odd. She had become withdrawn, but turned effusive and animated when probing the whereabouts of the frame. At one time, while asking me repeatedly for the Golden Sassafras flower, she said it was really important to get the seeds. When I asked, ‘What seeds?’ she became silent. Jing even had me on a conference call with Michael, who nearly convinced me that I should partner with them on this mysterious venture with the virology lab in China. When I asked for details, they said that would all come in due time after getting hold of the precious Golden Sassafras.”

Mary listened intently as Elly spoke, her eyes widening as she mentioned the “mysterious venture.” Recalling the conversation she and Forest had eavesdropped on at Cine El Rey, she interrupted, “I know why. They were attempting to unleash a deadly virus on the world and then sell a questionable cure.” Looking at Elly’s confused expression, she said, “Never mind, continue. I’ll explain later.”

“As I thought about it more, the story seemed suspicious. Considering that China has been stealing intellectual property from the United States for several years by bribing and enticing researchers into dubious ventures, I decided to report the matter to the head of our lab, who in turn alerted the federal authorities. I suspect that’s how Grace and John came into the picture.”

Elly took a deep breath as Mary digested this sudden influx of information.

“You did the right thing.” John encouraged Elly.

Sylvia exclaimed, “No wonder Michael was so friendly with me at the lecture in San Antonio. He was trying to find out if I had the Golden Sassafras!”

Mary butted in, “But why on earth does he want it so badly?”

“He did mention in his lecture that the Golden Sassafras roots contain a powerful chemical which has both toxic and medicinal properties and that female seeds are needed to propagate enough trees,” Sylvia remembered.

Mary sat up straight. “Wait, do you think Henry and Aronia gave the seeds to the Old Man? Maybe he is growing them on his farm! Were they really harvesting potatoes or something else, when Forest and I were visiting? We definitely need all of them to help us solve this riddle!”

*Madhavi Reddy calls Brownsville home though she was born and raised in South India. She enjoys working on eyes, playing with words, and planting trees. Beyond her day job of being an ophthalmologist, she loves writing poetry in English and her native language, Telugu, telling stories, and*

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