

10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



Issue #14
January 2024

Welcome to Issue #14 of 10 By10 Flash Fiction Stories. This issue has authors from Scotland, China and Nepal as well as a Boston transplant from Hong Kong. I am pleased that we have returning authors Rob Dinsmoor, Huina Zheng, Robert Scotellaro and Michael Minassian. They, plus the six newcomers present highly individual tales that will keep you entertained and perhaps inspire you to send in your own stories, whether you have been in 10 By 10 before or not. Fresh stories are always welcome. And, remember stories accepted must be 200 to 500 words long not previously published and submitted with a head & shoulders jpeg photo and a bio.

Looking forward to seeing your work!



Sincerely,
Zvi A. Sesling
Editor



Rob Dinsmoor has had dozens of short stories and flash fiction pieces published in literary magazines, and two of his collections of short fiction, *Toxic Cookout* and *You'll Never See It Coming*, were recently published by Big Table Publishing.

Bad Bots

They started showing up at my door one morning in early October. The first one announced its arrival by ringing my doorbell insistently for several minutes.

When I threw open the door, I saw a generic smiling face on a nondescript body. Probably male but could have been female. “What do the hell do you want?”

“How are you?” it asked.

“What do you want?”

“How do you like living in Hamilton? Do you like this neighborhood?”

“What do you want?”

“Do you want to sell your house? I know people who will buy it.”

“I don’t want to sell my house. Go away.”

“How much are you selling it for?”

“I’m not selling. Go away!”

“Who is it?” my wife called from the living room.

“Someone who wants to buy the house!”

“It’s probably another bot. Don’t engage! Just slam the door!”

A lady I thought was just out for a stroll walked up my front walk. When I looked at her closely, I realized that this was no lady. “Hi, baby. How are you? Do you want to be friends?” After a few seconds, she asked, “Why aren’t you responding?”

“What do you want?”

“Do want to see a photo of me?” Out of thin air, she produced a semi-clad photo of a young model with perfect hair, full lips, and no expression.

“That doesn’t even look like you!”

My wife pushed me aside, marched across the porch, and slapped the female bot. Its head came right off landed in the rhododendrons. Then she kicked the other bot, which fell on my front lawn and also came apart. Now another dozen bots were already walking steadily in our direction. “That’s why I told you not to engage them—it only brings more of them!”

The closest bots, dressed in a suits and ties and carrying briefcases, came forward. “Looks like there’s been an injury on your property. Do you need homeowner’s insurance?” asked one, carrying a briefcase.

“Have you been involved in a crime?” asked the other, also carrying a briefcase. “Do you need an attorney?”



Eveline Pye is a mathematician and lectured at Glasgow Caledonian University for over twenty years. She is an established poet but new to flash fiction. She was an invited poet at Bridges Conferences on mathematical poetry in Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, Austria, and Canada. Her first collection, *Smoke That Thunder* (Mariscat Press, 2015), explored her experiences as a Research Analyst in the Zambian Mining Industry. It included the poem “Mosi-Oa-Tunya” which was chosen for the 20 Best Scottish Poems of that Year. Her second pamphlet, *STEAM*, a collection of STEM poems was published by Red Squirrel (2022). *Reaching the Light*, poems about her childhood, will be available from Seahorse

Balancing the books in Chililabombwe

The wrong place to end up old and broke, copper price sinking faster than mine shafts, a hospital short of staff and drugs. The town was fading to a ghostly pallor. She squeezed her lids tight shut to ease her eyes. The blind’s wooden slats were tied together to keep out the sun, but October was the suicide month and heat radiated through the walls, released a reek of DDT. The overhead fan only stirred the chemical-scented air.

Her sweating hands cradled the ledger from Figov’s. His shop was nearly empty except for Chinese imports, cans of mackerel and lychees, so he’d built up a lucrative sideline in expat house clearances. She’d struggled today, seated under a savage sun at a rickety table recording sales, counting cash, in the middle of mayhem. There was so much uproar, a deafening din, that the

auctioneer came down off his box to yell in her ear, ‘Lot number 74. The Land Cruiser. Knocked down for eight hundred.’ It was hard to believe – the rusted wreck hadn’t been driven for years. They must be desperate for spares.

They sold everything; half a packet of tea; a plastic bag holding a meagre handful of rice. People scavenged in the vegetable garden. Someone dug up a deep-rooted passionfruit vine. She watched the owners’ lives fracture, fragment, as a much-loved home was spirited away as though invaded by an army of siafu ants. But at least they had the funds to start a new life, the kwacha’s collapse didn’t leave them short for a plane ticket.

Piercing pain from the swelling behind her eyes disrupted thought. She picked up a tumbler of cloudy water, well-boiled to avoid dysentery, swallowed yet more aspirin, laid her fingers over closed eyelids to check whether the globes were still moving forward. Her changing appearance wasn’t the worst of it. She couldn’t hold down this job, any job, much longer. Numbers blurred around the edges, separated into overlapping versions of themselves. Threes and eights looked exactly the same.

Every Sunday, she sat upright in the Baptist church, hair set in tight curls, varnished fingernails, face powdered. But she needed to dig deep, disinter a shadow version of herself suppressed since childhood, less rigid in the separation of right and wrong. She needed to save her sight. They had treatments back home, free on the NHS: intravenous steroids, surgery; radiation of the orbs. All available for the price of a plane ticket. She picked up the magnifying glass, began to transcribe the day’s takings into the ledger.

When it came to the Land Cruiser, she clutched the pen hard to stop her hand shaking, quaked as though entering her own indelible sins in the book of life. But the fear of blindness was more visceral, primeval. She cast off the image of her resurrected body waiting to be damned on the day of judgement, and her fingers created a three instead of an eight. She couldn’t see the difference.



Chandra Bahadur Lama, an aspiring writer and translation practitioner with a Master's Degree in English Education, is an English teacher. He is also a member of the executive committee of the Society of Translators Nepal. His love for literature, combined with a passion for travel and trekking, has shaped his unique perspective on life. In his philosophical framework, he discerns the quintessence of human existence to reside inherently within the domain of literature.

The Forgotten Lighthouse

Once upon a time, in a small coastal village, there stood an old lighthouse. Its white paint had faded, and the glass lantern was cracked. The villagers rarely paid it any attention, for modern navigation systems had rendered it obsolete. But the lighthouse had a secret—a story that whispered through the salty breeze.

Rumi, an elderly woman with silver hair, lived in the nearby cottage. She had been the lighthouse keeper for decades, tending to its needs and ensuring ships found safe harbor. Her eyes held the wisdom of countless storms and moonlit nights.

One stormy evening, as rain lashed against the windows, Rumi sat by the fireplace, sipping her chamomile tea. The radio crackled with news of a shipwreck off the treacherous cliffs. The modern beacon had failed, leaving sailors stranded in the tempest.

Rumi's heart stirred. She knew what she had to do. Wrapping herself in an old raincoat, she trudged up the winding path to the lighthouse. The wind howled, but she pressed on. The lantern room awaited her—a place she hadn't visited in years.

As she climbed the spiral staircase, memories flooded back—the laughter of lost sailors, the warmth of shared stories. She reached the top and gazed at the broken lantern. With trembling hands, she lit a candle and placed it inside.

The flame flickered to life, casting shadows on the walls. Rumi whispered ancient words—the same ones her grandmother had taught her. She closed her eyes and imagined ships guided by starlight, their crews safe under her watchful eye.

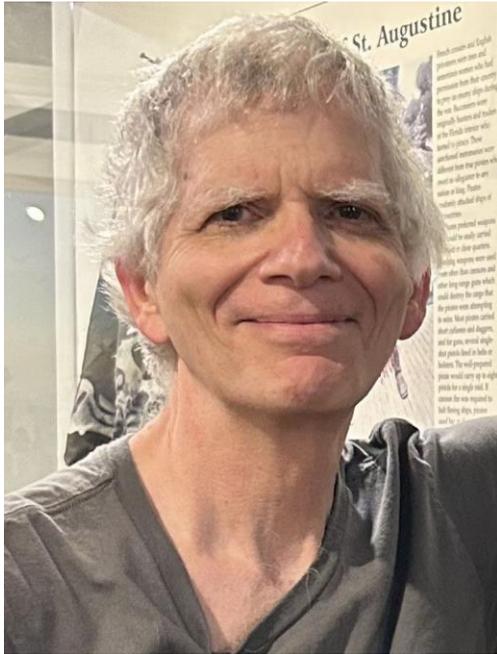
Outside, lightning illuminated the cliffs. Rumi's candle sent a feeble beam into the stormy night. And then something miraculous happened—the light intensified, piercing through rain and fog. A ship appeared—a ghostly vessel with tattered sails.

Rumi's heart swelled. She knew this ship—the one lost years ago during a violent gale. Its crew had vanished without a trace. Now they sailed toward her lighthouse—their souls seeking solace.

The ship glided past jagged rocks, drawn by Rumi's beacon. As it passed, spectral figures waved—a silent thank you. Tears blurred her vision as she watched them fade into eternity.

From that day on, Rumi tended to her forgotten lighthouse with renewed purpose. She became both keeper and guide—for lost souls and wandering ships alike. The villagers marveled at how ships navigated safely even when modern technology failed.

And so, every stormy night, Rumi climbed to the lantern room and lit her candle—the flame that bridged past and present, life and afterlife. For in that forgotten lighthouse, love and duty intertwined—a beacon of hope for all who sailed upon uncertain seas.



Barry Yedvobnick is an emeritus biology professor at Emory University in Atlanta. His stories have appeared in the weird-fiction anthology: *Penumbra No. 3*, *Kzine Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Dark Recesses* and various other places. He was short-listed at several recent *Flash Fiction Magazine* contests and narrates science fiction stories for *AntipodeanSF* radio shows.

Reciprocal Costs

The blend of aromas and chatter in the restaurant send me back thirty years, to breakfasts with my parents. They counted pennies, so meals out were special. My brother and I devoured pancakes decorated with smiley faces of whipped cream and chocolate chips. Liberated from her usual grind, Mom ignored the syrup dripping down our shirts. Her interactions with the restaurant servers were warm and memorable.

The contrast is painful. I watch you berate another waitress as my wife, Patty, cringes.

What attracted Dad to you after Mom died? You seldom tune in, and when you speak it's a complaint, or something inappropriate that spoils a moment. You're our cost for a visit.

"These tomatoes are green, and my coffee should be hotter," you say. The disgust and impatience in your voice jolt the young woman. Fortunately, she escapes eye contact. You barely glance up from your crossword puzzle. Even

Becky, our animated little girl, fails to engage you until Patty insists. We're your cost for a second marriage.

As the waitress glares, I motion Dad for an intervention, but he's busy cutting bacon into microscopic pieces. His displacement activities are well-honed. I stiffen, and Patty grabs my knee.

Earlier this morning, Becky asked if you would switch seats, so she could ride in the van next to my dad. A gruff "no," your answer. Patty already had my knee when Dad pulled out his phone and started tapping.

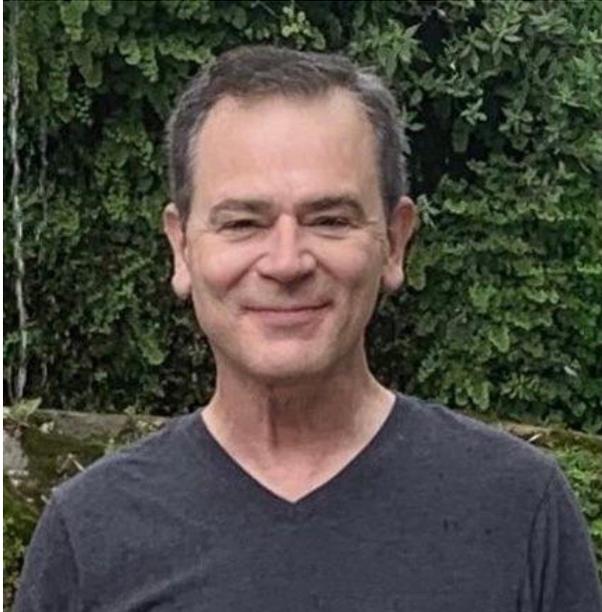
He will never learn that pictures showing both of you are surgically resected before placement in our photo album. You are excised with clean margins. No remnants remain to remind and regrow.

The waitress returns and tops off our coffees. She puts a plate of ripe tomatoes on the table and looks your way. You ignore her. We thank her.

Patty leans close, whispering that if our waitress responds the way she wants, it costs her job.

I used to date a waitress and know that's not always true.

"Skip the tomatoes," I say.



Jeff Harvey lives in San Diego. His recent work has appeared in *Five South*, *Bending Genres*, *MoonPark Review*, *Blink Ink* and *Pigeon Review*.

Orlando!

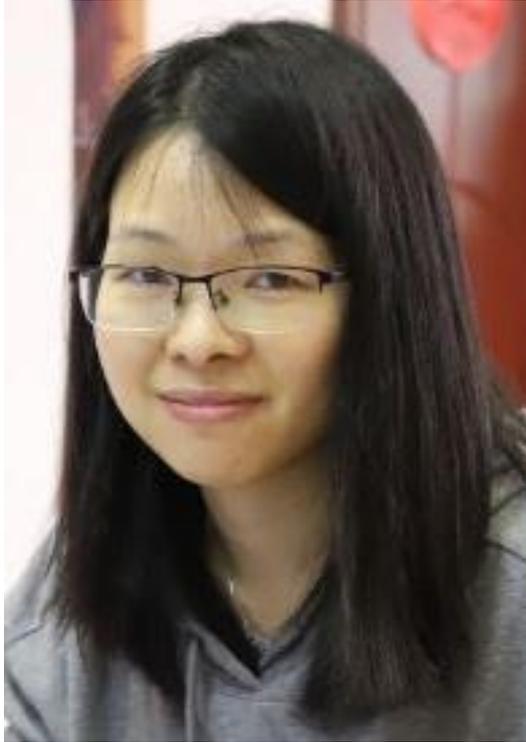
You always knew how to get me going on the dance floor, back before either of us understood love. You made me laugh with your stories about growing up on a houseboat with your grandma on the Mississippi River. You introduced me to Ruby, and the three of us became besties, always watching out for each other, like the time we took care of her after she hurt her back bailing hay and went on disability for six months.

Then Mick came along, and you left me for him because he was seven years younger and owned the entire Donny Osmond record collection. You left Memphis and moved with Mick to Orlando to sell real estate.

You were delivering pizzas when it happened. Some said he died from liver cancer. Some said suicide. Regardless, you knew it was from the endless supply of alcohol you provided.

And without even knocking on my front door, you burst in and insisted I ask Ruby if you could stay in her trailer until you got your first paycheck from your new job at the glass factory. Ruby had a big heart and forgave you, but I couldn't.

With only two Wal-Mart bags of clothes and your grandma's chamber pot collection, you moved in. When I went out to see Ruby on her birthday, she pleaded with me to go up to the trailer to check on you. You hadn't answered her phone calls, which was just like you, trying to get attention however possible. I knocked on the door and called out your name. I jiggled the doorknob. It opened. Lying naked on the kitchen floor with an empty bottle of Yellowstone, you left me and Ruby to take care of you one last time.



Huina Zheng, a Distinction M.A. in English Studies holder, works as a college essay coach. She's also an editor at *Bewildering Stories*. Her stories have been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and others. Her work has received nominations twice for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her husband and daughter.

Dialects of Belonging

In our culturally diverse family, where Hakka roots intertwined with the Cantonese dialect of Guangzhou, we envisioned a multilingual world for Lan before she was born. Her daily life was a vibrant tapestry of languages: Cantonese with her father, English with her Filipino teacher online, Hakka with her grandparents, and Mandarin at school.

As Mandarin began to overshadow other languages in her life, we encouraged her to cherish the dialects of our family's heritage.

"Mom, why? My classmates all speak Mandarin," Lan said.

"Our languages are more than mere communication; they're the soul of our heritage," I said, sharing my own story of linguistic duality. In Huizhou, where I was raised, a different Hakka variant filled the air, distinct from the one in our family roots. At home, my parents insisted on speaking our ancestral Hakka dialect. This bilingual upbringing gifted me with both variants of Hakka. I still remember my first summer trip back to our hometown in fourth grade, where I conversed with relatives in our ancestral dialect. I felt an instant, deep connection, a sense of truly belonging. I explained to Lan that each dialect was a link to our past, an essential part of our identity.

During her summer visit to our hometown, Lan was brimming with excitement to share a treasured family story in Hakka with her cousins. She had rehearsed it countless times. But as she began, the unexpected blank stares of her cousins left her words hanging in the air.

“What foreign language are you speaking?” one cousin asked, tilting their head in bafflement.

My heart sank as Lan’s. Lan’s cherished dialect, her bridge to the past, sounded unfamiliar here, in the very place it originated.

That night, Lan lay in bed. I sat beside her, listening as she poured out her feelings of being an outsider in her own heritage.

“Lan,” I began, choosing my words with care, “our family’s dialect is more than just words. It might feel distant now, but it’s a part of who we are.”

Lan turned to me, her expression thoughtful. In her silence, I saw a young mind wrestling with the complex tapestry of identity and belonging.

As the days passed, I saw it in the way she interacted with our elder relatives: her moments of thoughtful silence, her careful selection of Hakka words, her joy in speaking the dialect.

One afternoon, as we gathered for tea with extended family, her great-aunt recounted a traditional family tale in Hakka. A hush fell over the room. In the great-aunt’s expressive narrative, the unique rhythm and intonation of the Hakka language made her stories come to life.

The story came to an end. Her great-aunt said, “This is our story, our language, our heart. You, my child, must carry on our stories.”

And there, in Lan’s bright eyes, was a spark; a rich, living legacy, and a promise to keep our heritage alive.



Melissa Flores Anderson is a 3x BOTN and 1x Pushcart Prize-nominated Latinx Californian whose creative work has been published in *Maudlin House*, *The Write Launch* and *Rejection Letters*. She has a novelette and a chapbook forthcoming in 2024. She is a reader/editor for *Roi Fainéant Press*.

Leftovers

William, despite your public call for forgiveness, the plums really are the last straw. Last week it was the leftover short rib raviolis I left in the fridge with my name scrawled across the top in black Sharpie. And before that, you took the last ice cream bar even though you insist you don't care for vanilla. More infuriating is that you left the box in the freezer and when I reached into it, there was nothing left for me.

And now the stone fruits aren't safe?

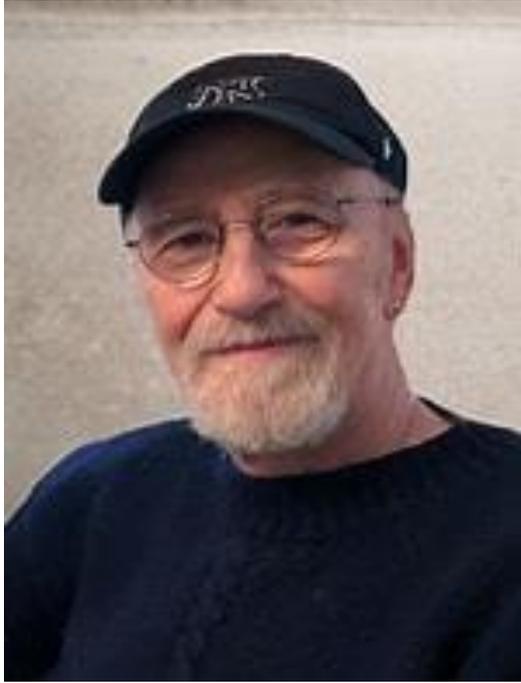
I drove two hours for those plums, to the farm stand in the Valley near my hometown. The one that is only open May to September, with the heirloom varieties that grow in one county in the entire country. These plums are in season for only two weeks out of the year.

You know I needed them, not for breakfast, but for the summer fruit salad I had planned for the gathering at your mother's. After the way she pushed the dish I brought for Easter brunch to the back of the table, I thought this would redeem me.

But now the balance is all off in this bowl of watermelon, honeydew, strawberries and peaches. It needed the deep purple hue of those plums, the tartness of their skins.

I searched through the refrigerator, thinking I had stuck them in the wrong drawer, rearranging the ketchup and the salad dressings, pulling out the vegetables from the crisper. When you first saw me, frantic in my hunt, you pretended that you didn't know anything about the fruit. Then I saw the telltale pit in the compost bucket under the sink. The flesh torn from the yellow oval. Only then did you confess.

You had to rub it in, by sharing just how delicious they were, and how cold.



Robert Scotellaro's work has been included in *W.W. Norton's Flash Fiction International*, *Maryland Literary Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Matter Press*, *New World Writing*, *Best Small Fictions 2016, 2017, and 2021*, *Best Microfiction 2020* and elsewhere. He is the author of seven chapbooks, several books for children, and six flash fiction collections. He was the winner of Zone 3's Rainmaker Award in Poetry and the Blue Light Book Award for his fiction. His flash collection, *What Are the Chances?* (Press 53) was a finalist for the 2020 Big Other Book Award for fiction. His chapbook of flash and micro stories is *God in a Can* (Bamboo Dart Press). He has, along with James Thomas, coedited *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction*, published by W.W. Norton & Co. Robert is one of the founding donors to The Ransom Flash Fiction Collection at the University of Texas, Austin. He lives in San Francisco.

Coming Clean

Sometimes happiness is a moving target, Peter told himself without the words for it, as he sat across from his ex to work out some final details so late in life. He had told everyone who would listen that his father was killed in WWII. He said it with a crumpled face and with such conviction that he nearly believed it himself. In truth, his father abandoned them and married a young Italian gal, after rolling in on a tank, and had three kids with her who became pickpockets in Rome, and now he finally told his ex the truth. “Since we’re coming clean,” she told him, “remember that baby grand we had all those years ago? — well, I hopped in the sack with that piano tuner, but *just once*, and only once and never with anyone else, ever,” and held up a finger for prideful emphasis. Peter stared at the bright red nail polish, relieved—happy to know *he* wasn’t the reason the damn thing sounded like shit.



Michael Minassian is a Contributing Editor for *Verse-Virtual*, an online poetry journal. His short stories have appeared recently in *Impspired*, *Flash Boulevard*, and *10 by 10*. Minassian is the author of three poetry collections as well as a chapbook of poetry *Jack Pays a Visit*. For more about him go to: <https://michaelminassian.com>

My Neighbor's Dog

I always thought my neighbor Roberto looked like a bird, with his bald head and long, crooked beak of a nose. After he retired a few years ago, his wife died, but he kept the house, and told me he liked the silence. Once I caught him sneaking around in my backyard at night and warned him off. After that, he kept to himself. Last week, I brought him a few mangoes from my tree. The next day, I found a crate of oranges at my front door. "That's a thank you for the mangoes," Roberto said.

A few days later, I saw his dog sitting on my lawn. I didn't give it much thought. Bruno, that was the dog's name, was half Rottweiler, with a short black coat and gray stripes of age on his muzzle. One thing, Roberto never failed to clean up after Bruno.

After I showered, had breakfast, and graded a few online papers, I checked and saw Bruno was still sitting on the lawn in the same spot. When I stepped outside, I saw a figure sprawled out on the grass. It was Roberto. He was face down, naked, and had a bullet hole in the back of his head.

Someone must have called 911 because a minute later the police arrived. Of course, they wanted to know what happened, but I couldn't say much except

I had seen the dog out on my lawn a couple of hours earlier and came outside and found Roberto's body. An unmarked car rolled up, and two detectives checked the body and questioned me: *who was it? why was he naked? how did he end up on my lawn? did I kill him?*

I told them what I knew (which wasn't much) and no, I didn't own a gun, and no, I wouldn't say anything else without a lawyer (all those hours spent watching Law & Order weren't time wasted). A few neighbors gathered behind the police line, but no one had seen or heard anything. Everyone seemed to be sorry that Roberto was dead. We traded some sympathetic words, and then I went back inside.

The next morning I noticed Bruno was back on my lawn. I called Animal Control and they picked him up, but a few days later he was back, sitting in the same spot. I called a second time and told them to come and get Bruno. They showed up and so did the two detectives. I watched them from my window. The detectives stood next to Bruno on the lawn, staring at my front door. Then the Animal Control guy led Bruno into a cage in the back of his truck. Right after that the detectives got into their car and drove off. I hoped I had seen the last of Bruno and the police. At least, I wouldn't have to see Roberto again. And I was sick of seeing that dog. Bruno really was an ugly brute of a mutt.



Nobel Shut Chan hails from Hong Kong, China, but has recently made her home in Boston. Her writing has been published in *orangepeel*, *Applause*, and *The Bitchin' Kitsch*.

Greatly Exaggerated

I'm not dead, she thinks, as she reads the newspaper at 10 o'clock on a Sunday morning. Her name is there: Jane Li, 32 years old, deceased. Hit by a car. A car took her husband, but that's not her husband. She traces the eyes (what did he call it? Almond eyes?) and wonders when she got so old.

The kettle whistles and she makes tea, the British kind. Her mother is coming over. She was supposed to arrive twenty minutes ago, but she's the world's slowest driver. Not a *bad* driver. No one in their family is allowed to be a bad driver.

Maybe she should text something on the family chat: I'm not dead, something along those lines. Maybe they wouldn't read it. Maybe they'd be disappointed.

Probably a misprinting, anyway. Another Jane Li has died. There are many Janes in the world, and even more Lis. Some are doctors, and nurses, and people who finished medical school. Some are married with two children. Some are dead.

She sips her tea. Her mother texts that she is five minutes away. She grabs a pair of scissors, cuts out the obituary, and tacks it next to his on the fridge.