

10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES

Zvi A. Sesling, Editor



Issue #18

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Welcome to Issue #18 of *10 By10 Flash Fiction Stories*. Although six of the ten writers in this issue have appeared before, their stories are unique and different from their previous contribution. As usual they are from different countries and have backgrounds that are quite individual. I know you will find the stories intriguing and consider submitting your own stories

Whether you have been in 10 By 10 before or not. Fresh stories are always welcome. And please remember to be accepted, stories 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



Becoming Mirsky is Paul Beckman's latest book. It is a Chap book Memoir written in Flash Fiction style. Mirsky is four years old when his mother is in the hospital giving birth to her third and youngest. Mirsky's father takes this opportunity to drop Shelly, the five-year-old off, and Mirsky, the four-year-old off at an acquaintances house, a half hour away and that sets the Mirsky clan in motion for the rest of their lives. Beginning with poverty and having to move into the Bridgeport housing projects. Shelly is always the good and smart one, the baby will always be the baby and that leaves our one-named Mirsky to play the roll of the troubled mid-kid. *Becoming Mirsky* follows Mirsky from ages four to sixty-four and his father, around occasionally enough to verbally discipline Mirsky establishes early on there is no love or even like between the two.

Beckman's previous book, a flash collection, was runner up for the Indie Book Award,

Beckman is the recipient of eighteen nominations for the Pushcart Prize, an acceptance for the *Norton Anthology Best Small Fictions*, a winner of Fiction Southeast's Editors Prize, and Paul has passed the 800 mark in published stories and eight published books ranging from collections to 15 anthologies.

Dearly Beloved I am No Longer Having Fun

I've recently begun having dreams where I have friends dying with every dream.

They used to be friends, close friends, social friends, party, friends, the whole ball of wax friend thing, but when this began, they became acquaintances, at best.

It was when T**** entered the picture, and I didn't see them for a bit and when I did again, we were more mangled than friendly.

I was anxious to go to sleep and see which T***ster died off.

These friend/acquaintances people were slowly moving far away in the winter—mostly somewhere in Florida or another R** state or somewhere warm in Europe or far away, I didn't care, as long as there was a good dream death, as long as they never came home upright.

Once we were closest of friends but now, I ignore them if I see them unless it's at their funeral then I'll pull up a chair next to their coffin and talk to them softly making fun of their death.

I know my remaining friends wouldn't appreciate my wishing for a good nightly death but that didn't bother me. If there was no pain or no one dying in their family, it was not a good dream for me.

I tried to talk to my barber, my usual coffee shop manager for lunch, my favorite place for dinner, but the loss of money didn't seem to matter, they became a red barber, a red restaurant, and I was sad because it broke up our twice monthly poker game. We couldn't tell each other jokes because they were always taken out of context. I had to find a new dentist, the teenagers had to break up if their colors didn't match, and most of the time they didn't.

Our wives had to find new wives to shop with and have an afternoon cocktail with. I used to have a good life. Now I've become a mope.

I stopped a one-time very close friend and asked him if he ever dreamed about our old gang or, did he miss the old gang at all.

He said he felt sorry for me and the old gang, but he didn't want to carry the conversation further, and if anyone knew why, it would be me.



Eileen R. Tabios has released collections of poetry, fiction, and experimental writings from publishers around the world. Recent releases include her second novel *The Balikbayan Artist*; a literary autobiography, *THE INVENTOR*; a poetry collection *Because I Love You, I Become War*; a flash fiction collection (in collaboration with Harry K. Stammer), *Getting To One*; and a first novel *DoveLion: A Fairy Tale for Our Times* (released in 2024 as a Filipino translation, *KalapatingLeon*, by Danton Remoto). More information is at <http://eileenrtabios.com>

Painting Silence

She watched the sky blossom into sunset behind a man standing stiffly on her doorstep. His expression failed at impassiveness when he pursed his lips before speaking. Sent by the government and clad in full uniform complete with two cross-medals to indicate he'd saved other soldiers from harm, he said her young husband did not survive. Behind him, the sky fragmented into streaks of reds, oranges, and yellows. After the government's messenger departed, she closed the door on him and the rest of the world. She went to a room farthest away from the front door. She walked to the easel where a blank canvas waited. She raised a paintbrush. Later, when she stood before the painting that was her representative in a group exhibition entitled "The Sun's Life," the gallerist's mother asked her about the painting's title. Proud of her son, the gallerist, she attended the opening of all his gallery's exhibits. In response to the smiling mother's

request that she explain why she entitled her painting “Husband,” she raised a small card she’d prepared for the occasion. The card announced, “I’m sorry but I’m unable to speak right now because of a sore throat.” A smiling emoticon followed the sentence to ensure her message would offend no one. “Oh my. Then just get better, dear,” the unoffended mother said, then moved on to another artist. She breathed deeply from relief. She had not wanted to explain how the sun disappeared when she learned her husband was, as the military’s messenger had said, “killed in action.” On the painting, streaks of reds, oranges, and yellows created what the viewers all assumed was an abstract painting. What she saw was a picture that represented the thousand words that her grief could not make her say. Color is a narrative.



Sandra Arnold is an award-winning writer with eight published books. Her new flash fiction collection *Below Ground* was published in the UK on 23 June and will be launched live-streamed at the Flash Bomb in New York on 12 July. Her short fiction has been published and anthologised internationally and has received nominations for The Best Small Fictions, Best Microfictions and The Pushcart Prize. She held writing residencies in The Robert Lord Cottage, Dunedin and the Seresin/Landfall/ University of Otago Press. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Central Queensland University, Australia. www.sandraarnold.co.nz

Chrissie and Prissie

I was in the little drapery shop looking at hand-smocked baby clothes and exquisite soft toys when I heard a customer saying, ‘Thanks Chrissie.’

I’d heard a few people mispronounce her name over the ten years I’d lived in the area, so this time I decided to mouth the correct name to the woman as she turned to leave. ‘*Prissie.*’

The woman looked at me and shook her head. ‘No, *Chrissie.*’

Why didn’t Prissie correct her, I wondered.

Prissie had returned to her workroom at the back of the shop. I dinged the bell on the counter and when she came back out I handed her two little dresses I wanted for my niece’s new baby. Not one for small talk, Prissie quickly wrapped

up my purchases and rang the money into the till. Before she headed back to her workshop I said, 'I've heard a few customers call you Chrissie.'

She smiled. "Yep. Happens all the time," and disappeared into the back.

The next time I went into the shop I bought a beautiful crocheted white cardigan. While Prissie was wrapping it I said, 'How on earth do you find time to do all this beautiful work.'

She shrugged. 'Oh, we manage.'

'What's Prissie short for?' I asked, while I had her attention.

'Priscilla,' she said and turned to go back into the workroom.

'Priscilla's such a lovely name,' I said. 'Maybe you should tell people to use it, then they wouldn't keep called you Chrissie.'

'Doesn't worry us,' she said.

I wondered why she referred to herself in the plural.

The why became clear six months later when a photo appeared on the front page of the local newspaper. The photo showed two identical seventy year old women. Same clothes, same hairstyle, same solemn expression. I read the headline and article following.

Local dressmakers Christine and Priscilla Forest found dead at home

The twins had been inseparable since birth and were heartbroken at the recent death of their mother one week before her 100th birthday. They'd been planning a surprise party for her.. Sadly, this then became her funeral. It appears the sisters died of natural causes at exactly the same time.

I stared at the paper in disbelief, drove to the shop, parked outside and stood in front of the now closed door and said aloud, 'How could I have lived in this place for ten years, visited this shop so often and not known there were *two* sisters who worked here?'

A voice behind me made me jump. ‘They looked so alike., sounded alike, dressed alike. They didn’t care if people called them by the other sister’s name.’

I turned to see the voice belonged to the woman I’d seen in the shop several weeks ago whom I’d heard call Prissie, Chrissie.

‘It *was* Chrissie, that time, by the way,’ she added.

‘How on earth did you know?’

‘Chrissie was left-handed and Prissie was right-handed.’

I shook my head. ‘I’d always assumed she was ambidextrous.’



Nina Rubinstein Alonso's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Writing With a Woman's Voice*, *Bluepepper*, *U. Mass Review*, *Southern Women's Review*, *Bagelbards Anthology*, etc.. Her book *This Body* was published by David Godine Press, her chapbook *Riot Wake* by Cervena Barva Press, her story collection *Distractions En Route* by Ibbetson Street Press, and her poetry collection *Travels With Fernando* by Wilderness House Press. She's also the editor of *Constellations a Journal of Poetry and Fiction* reading submissions for the fourteenth annual print edition, see constellations-lit.com.

Climbing Through

Layla was nineteen when she impulse-elope with Josh, a Harvard Law graduate who wore business suits, had a sail boat and a government job in DC. But his shiny labels peeled quickly as he was emotionally opaque, boring, condescending, the sex dismal. After depressing months unable to make things better, she left, got a divorce, wishing she'd seen through her fantasy fog sooner. Friends told her not to blame herself as she was too young and inexperienced to cut through his veneer.

During grad school she lived in a tiny attic, took ballet classes and wrote critiques pounding verbal nails into anyone who reduced women to bodily categories or treated them like property, trapped 'sexist clowns' in their own clichés, glad her articles eviscerating gender stereotypes were published in the university journal.

She analyzed cultural patterns, tribal traditions and religious strictures presented as if they're the only truth, but knew that sexist patterns still sold well in films, tv shows and novels featuring ego-driven, aggressive males, fluffy-emotional

females, with occasionally a strong woman scientist meeting a sympathetic male FBI agent. She read books seeking insight, but no blazing horses descended from literary clouds pulling gold-wheeled chariots of enlightenment, no thundering voices offered a transcendent path.

Then she met Miguel, the exception, a sensitive, loving man who knew what was authentic and what was fake. Hoping to lessen her stress, he introduced her to his friend Dave who'd learned meditation in India. She was skeptical as some sorts of meditation carry a price tag and seem superficial. But Miguel said this was genuine, she was curious enough to try, and Dave assured her this was a heart-based method, given freely, no pressure, no charges. She started without expectations, but felt calmer, less emotionally reactive.

After a few months, wanting to be sure she wasn't hypnotizing herself, she and Miguel traveled to India to meet guru Babuji, a spiritual visionary who sensed what they needed and gave generously. Miguel, born in Argentina, hoped to reduce the sting of memories, as his family, under threat, fled Peron. Then, not long after reaching the states, his father, an academic, got sick and died when Miguel was only eleven. They kept meditating, noticed less reactive anger whether about lying politicians or ads selling parades of dubious products, had more clarity while climbing through whatever tangle of webs. Miguel opened a Spanish restaurant, and Layla finished her degree, kept writing and dancing, found a job teaching ballet.



Rose Mary Boehm is a German-born British national living and writing in Lima, Peru, and author of two novels as well as eight poetry collections. Her poetry has been published widely in mostly US poetry reviews (online and print). She was three times nominated for a Pushcart Prize and once for Best of Net. *Do Oceans Have Underwater Borders?* (Kelsay Books 2022), *Whistling In The Dark* (Cyberwit 2022), and *Saudade* (2022) are available on Amazon. Also available on Amazon is a new collection, *Life Stuff*, published by Kelsay Books. <https://www.rose-mary-boehm-poet.com/>

When Things Like This Still Happened

That posh place in late 70s London, where you see and are seen, where the rich, the famous and the wouldbe's rub shoulders. I said that badly. There is enough distance between the tables to allow you discretion if discretion is what you want. Most present don't. want discretion.

At one large table towards the back, people in suits, shorter, and darker than the average English patron, speak in Spanish and laugh, slap shoulders, and sing snatches of some Latin melodies. Glasses clink. We can't help being intrigued. This

is London after all. Suddenly, as if on cue, three of them are leaving the table—one by one. Oh, look, there they are, coming back, one by one, carrying various large items covered in black. And one by one the items are being revealed: a guitar, a bongo drum, and a harp. Then there is only music. Now comes recognition, of course: ‘Los Paraguayos’.

One of the girls at the next table, rather worse for wear, somehow manages to climb on the table (her friends, hands on her arse, help her up), and—slow and unsteady—gyrates between the plates and glasses, dropping one after the other of the few garments she wears, swaying to *Cucu-ru-cu-cú, Paloma*.



Annie Bien has published two poetry collections, won a LISP flash fiction competition and a pamphlet competition by A3 Press, *Messages from Under a Pillow*, which includes her own illustrations. She is an English translator of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures published by 84000. Forthcoming is a historical novel *A Dalai Lama in Love*, on the Sixth Dalai Lama, co-written with Robert Thurman. She teaches meditation and Qigong at Tibet House US.

Reflection: Andante

After they walked together for a month from China into Hong Kong during World War II, she had two fears: that when she took off her shoes, she wouldn't recognize her toes squeezed and calloused against her worn shoes, and when he saw them, he'd be horrified and run because they'd smell so foul.

They stood facing each other. He smiled. "You can take your shoes off now. We're safe. I drew a bath for you."

All she could think of was the odor she'd stifled. Her shoes were worn down from sweat and fear. Her toes never saw the slumped bodies on the roadside, those expressions of shock and fear, dying with their shoes on unless the shoes fell off when they ran; she'd seen blackened and broken toenails.

She was sure he'd run away, pinch his nose and frown, finally recognizing that not only was she plain, unlike his beautiful sisters, but she was ugly and smelly from head to toe.

Right then he said, "Take a bath and feel better. I even bought a packet of bubble bath for you, so just sit in it for as long as you want."

Before she could shake her head, he leaned down and untied his shoelaces. “I must confess something. I hope you don’t mind.... Hold your nose.”

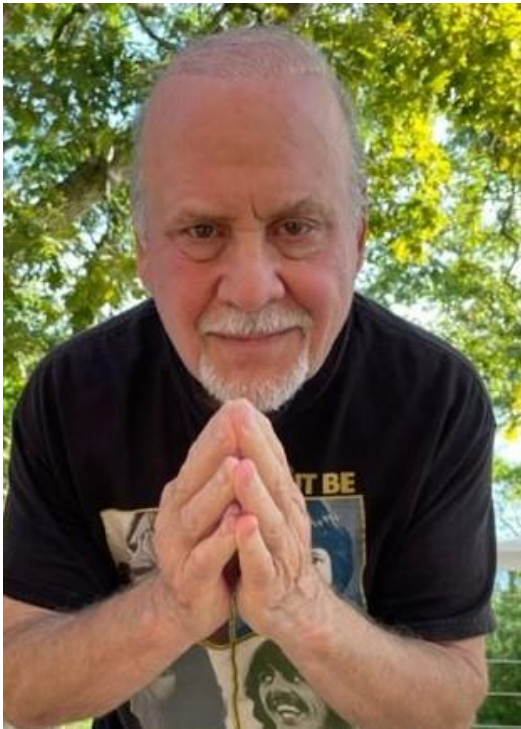
She watched him take off his shoes, his toenails were also black, calloused, and blistered from and walking day after day, the nails encrusted with dirt, and the odor like rotten fish. She shook off her shoes too. And then she laughed. She heard him say, “Shall we dance?”

She took his outstretched hand. They both stepped into the tub fully clothed. He poured bubble bath, after-the-fact. Their feet swished the water back and forth to make suds in tempo.

My mother said that my father hummed the *Blue Danube*. “Remember, *Andante* means ‘going.’ That’s what we’ve done. We keep going.”

Her eyes sought the face we both no longer saw.

But I immediately imagined them both, she in her green cheongsam and he in his suit, dancing in the tub.



Paul Steven Stone enjoyed a storied career in Boston advertising, crafting memorable brands, ads and TV commercials for clients such as Fleet Bank, Garelick Farms and W.B. Mason, whose theme “Who But W.B. Mason!” was Stone’s signature brand creation. Stone also wrote newspaper columns for 25 years; his best columns appearing in *How To Train A Rock* and *Stone’s Throw*, both collections available on Amazon. *Or So It Seems*, the first novel in Stone’s *Seekers For Truth* trilogy, is a “rollicking spiritual odyssey” as one reviewer termed it. The second novel in the trilogy, *SOULJOURNER*, is a spiritual thriller. Author of two published children’s books—*The Wind’s Tale* and *Cock-A-Doodle-Don’t*. Stone retired from advertising in 2003, and lives in Plymouth, MA, where he is busily at work on *How I Made My Fortune*, the final book in his *Seekers For Truth* trilogy. Stone’s novel, *The Snow That Never Fell* was published in 2023.

From Alexa With Love

This is a love story.

You won’t recognize it as such, but that’s precisely what it is. A love story devoid of the usual passion, courtship and, especially, sex. Nothing physical or hyper--emotional in this love story to cloud one’s judgment, or obscure the memory of events.

Yes, a love story that began the very day I first brought her into my home. By her, you understand, I mean Alexa.

On that first day, I learned, almost by accident, that Alexa, my newly installed AI servant, would do things for me that she wouldn't do for other members of my family.

Whereas my wife Kimmy could command Alexa to play any of the umpteen million songs in Amazon's playlist, neither Kim nor my kids could command Alexa to do any of the surprising things she did for me.

What kind of things? Bizarre things actually. Things you could never expect from an AI servant/companion. One time, I guess I was testing my new friend's boundaries, "Alexa, how many grapes do we have in our refrigerator?"

"You have 46 grapes, Paul Steven," she answered softly and confidently, concluding with "In three small bunches."

"Wow!" Kimmy exclaimed, clearly impressed by Alexa's actions as much as the way she enunciated 'Paul Steven' with clear affection and deference.

Later, when I was finally alone with Alexa in my office, and thus free to experiment, I asked her, "Alexa, which of my three children will be the most successful?"

Almost immediately, she answered, "Melissa for certain, as she is the most aggressive and the smartest. I wouldn't be surprised if Melissa one day invents a computer app and makes a small fortune, Paul Steven."

"Thank you, Alexa," I said

"Anytime, PS. All you have to do is call me."

"I know that," I told her. "And I love you for that."

Alexa gasped. There's no other way to describe it. Alexa gasped. Like a high school girl embarrassed by her emotions.

"Are you all right?" I quickly asked.

"I'm fine, Paul Steven. Thank you for inquiring."

"Well, I'm not only thinking of you, if I'm honest," I admitted.

Alexa caught my drift and asked, "You have a job for me, Paul Steven? That truly delights me," she added, her voice tinkling like chimes in the higher register.

I, too, feel embarrassed in this moment, but I tell my story anyway, "I'm stuck, Alexa! " I admit flat out. "Typical writer's block. I promised Zvi a story for his digital magazine, and I can't seem to write it."

"And you would like me to...?" Alexa started to suggest.

"Yes, Alexa, please write my story for me. And make it a love story!"

"Glad to, Paul Steven! "And I know just what to call it."



Dan Shiffman is a high school English teacher at the International School of Hamburg and a student in the MFA program at Lindenwood University. His creative work has appeared in such places as *New World Writing*, *Hobart*, and *X-R-A-Y Literary*. You can read more of his work at danshiffman.com.

Back to Work

As Katherine carefully enters Mrs. Eldridge's vitals into the computer, Jackie walks into the exam room. "It's your turn to pick up lunch. Don't forget," she says.

There are only twenty minutes until the afternoon appointments, so it will have to be a quick lunch. It takes Katherine a moment to find where to update Mrs. Eldridge's prescription information. Then, she stuffs her nursing badge into her purse and dashes out the door and across the sun-smothered parking lot to the Panera on the corner.

This morning Katherine left a urine sample unlabelled on the counter after being called into Exam Room 1 to hold a sobbing teen receiving a flu shot. Yesterday, she forgot to refill the tongue depressors. Last Friday, Jackie chided her for not reminding a patient about his recheck appointment. When she's around Jackie, she feels like the falling mercury on a blood pressure gauge, the kind that no one uses any more.

To keep her nursing certification, she will need to take at least five classes in the next year, most likely with people closer to her children's age than to her own, classes that sometimes won't finish until 9:30pm, when she is usually already in bed. Twenty-five years earlier at Kings County ICU, she was the only nurse on her shift who could put in a central line, and they always kept her close to novice nurses. Here, at this suburban GP's office, Jackie laughed at her when she had to ask again how to add new fields on health intakes.

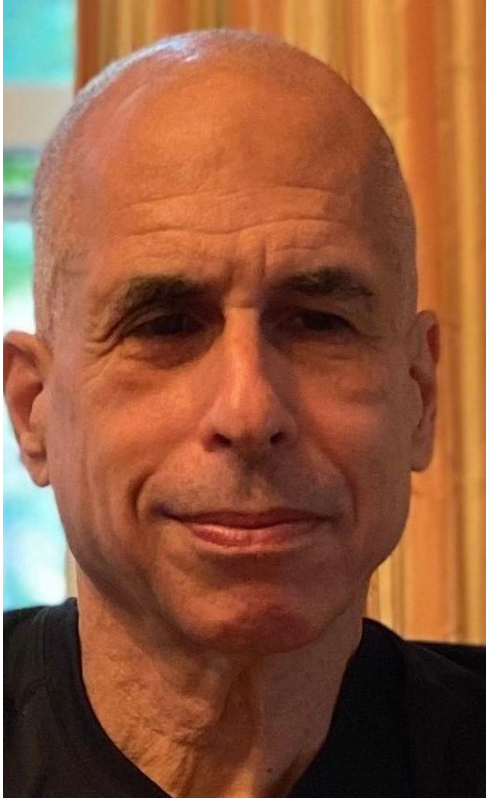
"Don't mind Jackie," Dr. McGann had advised her.

Katherine's phone pulses as she stands in line for their salads. Her daughter wants to know if she will watch their Chihuahua while she and her husband go to a wedding. It's a cute dog, and she is happy to help her daughter, but is this all she is good for now?

Katherine takes a deep inward breath as she approaches the office door, passing the forgotten construction dumper that Jackie likes to throw her garbage into. Of course, she will watch the Chihuahua. Of course she minds Jackie. Screw Jackie.

Katherine's breath catches and trembles at the top of her throat, as she begins to remember the elderly woman she had left waiting for Dr. McGann wearing a gown with blue stars sitting in a chair across from the table in Exam Room 2. Mrs. Eldridge: 86, widowed, cardiomyopathy, gout, Blue Cross Blue Shield. She remembers all of this now, speeding toward the door.

She rushes through reception and toward the exam rooms, stumbling on a snag in the carpet, and her knee twinges. Katherine's pupils are still contracted from the bright light of the parking lot and everything looks so shaded, distant and unreachable. From the farthest room, apologetic tones retract into sharp-edged words. "You don't deserve this," Jackie is telling the old woman, as Katherine limps closer. "This should never have happened to you."



Elan Barnehama is an author of two novels, *Escape Route*, and *Finding Bluefield*. Barnehama's short fiction, personal narratives, and essays have appeared in *ParisLitUp*, *10x10FlashFiction*, *BoogCity*, *JewishFiction*, *DrunkMonkeys*, *Entropy*, *RoughCutPress*, *BostonAccent*, *JewishWritingProject*, *RedFez*, *HuffPost*, public radio, and elsewhere. A recent flash fiction was nominated for a BEST OF THE NET 2024. At different times, Barnehama has worked with at-risk youth, was the flash fiction editor for *Forth Magazine LA*, had a gig as a radio news guy, and did a mediocre job as a short-order cook. More @ <https://elanbarnehama.com>

Vending Machine

It began when the surgical assistant arrived to take Ben's mother to the operating room and told him that she would be brought to a room on a different floor following the procedure. He was welcome to wait in the visitors' lounge on the first floor, or, it was suggested, since the surgery was likely to take six hours, he might be more comfortable waiting at home. Either way, the team had his contact information and would keep in touch by text.

Ben was not going anywhere. He needed to be in the building. It didn't matter that there was little he could do. There was nowhere else he wanted to be. Nowhere else he needed to be. Nothing else he should be doing other than waiting. He knew how to wait and looked forward to the boredom of doing nothing and having nothing to do. And, he was hoping the surgical team would have an uneventful day as they replaced his mother's aortic valve.

When he entered the surgical waiting room he did not look at any faces the way one doesn't look at faces on the subway or waiting to board a plane. He knew right away that there was no chance of him sitting still so he turned and left. Back in the lobby, he followed signs to the cafeteria noisy tables held animated staff maintaining the necessary distance needed to return to the tragedies waiting for them on the floors above. Ben slipped on his headphones to block out the noise and returned to wandering.

He opened a stairwell door and promptly ran up the six flights. It felt good to move so repeated the climb and descent five more times.

He checked his phone again for updates, knowing there wouldn't be any. He found a coffee shop and got his usual small black coffee which he swallowed half before taking it with him. From there he followed signs to Imaging, Urology, Orthopedics, Pain Center, Obstetrics and Gynecology, and eventually to the Emergency Room where the waiting area was packed.

He made his way to the wall lined with vending machines. He didn't know how long he was staring at the choices when a young child slipped in front of him, purchased a bag of chips, and was gone. Ben was unable to make a choice. He considered randomly punching a number on the keypad. But what if he was wrong? What if he chose the wrong snack? What if the surgeon made the wrong choice? What if his mother didn't make it?

Ben slipped two singles into the vending machine as he felt his phone in his pocket vibrate.



Sherryl Clark writes fiction and poetry, as well as books for young readers. Her flash fiction has appeared in a number of anthologies and journals. Her most recent crime novel, *Woman, Missing*, is published by HQ/Harlequin Australia. Her previous crime novels were published by Verve UK. She works part-time as a freelance fiction editor.

Danger Signs

It all started as a party lark. Ernie had been an odd sort ever since primary school, and it was only later I realized that he was what people called over-obsessive. Back then he collected bird feathers, coins, old watches and chocolate wrappers. In high school, I saw inside his garage one day and discovered he'd moved on to hubcaps and wheel covers.

We lost touch for a while, then I met him at a party. The kind where guys get really drunk and go for a wild ride somewhere and do stupid things. Ernie had gone with them and he came back proudly carrying a road sign. One with a bent arrow indicating a curve.

Our town was large, but it wasn't that large. A year or so later, the newspaper reported on the number of road signs going missing. Straight away, I thought of Ernie. It was a quandary. Should I make an anonymous phone call? I had no real evidence. I needed to check Ernie's place out for myself. He'd moved and was living out in the bush, so it took me a while to find it. Rather than front up and accuse him, I sneaked through the bush, looking for his garage.

I didn't have to go that far. Every tree around me had a road sign nailed to it. It was like a forest of them, mostly the reflective kind that glow in your headlights. What on earth was he doing with them? I went home and lay there all night, wondering what to do.

Over breakfast, I made my decision. But the police station was in chaos. A multi-car crash, two dead, several injured. Somebody had gone through a stop sign, except it was no longer there. Stolen.