



10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES

Zvi A. Sesling, Editor



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Welcome to Issue #19 of 10 By10 Flash Fiction Stories. Three of the ten flash fiction authors in this issue have appeared before: Phil Temples with his often off beat humor, Gary Finke who often provides a different approach to his story and Amy Grech whose stories often are hardboiled. Then we have the humor of Pamela Painter, Anne Anthony's bittersweet story telling, Rebecca Parker's job interview from Hell, Mikki Aronoff shows us that house hunting is not always what you think, Avrilla Fee relates what compassion is and Joanne Taranto provides touches of sci-fi and humor. Their stories are as diverse as their personalities. I know you will find the stories entertaining and I hope you consider submitting your own stories, whether you have been in 10 By 10 before or not. New 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 with a bio.

Looking forward to seeing your work!



Sincerely,

Zvi A. Sesling

Editor



Pamela Painter is the award-winning author of five story collections. Her stories have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, and have been included in Best Micro and Best Short Fictions, and received four Pushcart Prizes. Painter's stories have been produced by Word Theatre in LA, London and New York.

I Have Lied To You

Before I leave my flat to meet you at six, at the Oak Room, where martinis arrive in tiny carafes on ice and the gin is surely Hendricks, I practice telling the mirror "I have lied to you." It is a confession long overdue. I remember how my lying eyes swerved away in the telltale sign you were too hurt to notice, but this time I promise myself I will not look away. Again, I lean into the mirror and say, "I have lied to you."

Oh, rouge, I forgot rouge, far more important than lipstick, so I pat it on my ashamed cheeks. Then as I whisper the third time, "I have lied to you," my hoop earrings suddenly seem far too dramatic. I set about exchanging them for—for yes, pearl studs—but a hoop catches in my long silk scarf, a sign, surely, that the color fuchsia is all wrong so I unwind it from around my neck and toss it on the bed.

This puts my charcoal sweater into stark relief, a bit too plain, so I pull it over my head, careful not to unravel the French braid you so admire. "I have lied to you," I tell my bare shoulders, realizing that if I'm to wear my ivory cashmere, I need to change my black bra for nude. Soon I am starting over in a nude lace bra, still admitting "I have lied to you." I cannot be later than usual, so I pull on my cashmere sweater, decide the black pencil skirt will do just fine, and lean in to tell the mirror one last time, "I have lied to you."

When will be the right time to tell you? Surely drinks will segue into a long dinner. Then into cozy nightcaps at your flat. And after that....I turn from the mirror, gather up my purse and wrap. Really.

Really?

No. Better perchance to keep it to myself.



Phil Temples has lived in the greater Boston area for most of his life. Phil has published five mystery-thriller novels, a novella, and four story anthologies in addition to over 220 online short stories. Phil also likes to dabble in mobile photography. He is a member of GrubStreet and the Bagel Bards. You can learn more about Phil by visiting his website at <https://temples.com>.

“Either Way” Guarantee

Doc Enderlin poked and prodded at Mrs. Alice McGillicutty’s ten-year-old cream-colored Pomeranian breed. The old woman was very concerned as she watched the veterinarian’s thorough exam. As the doctor palpated the dog’s chest cavity, he shook his head slightly from side to side, and his face took on a grimace. He lingered over one spot in particular. As Enderlin pushed, the elderly canine let out a brief whimper, followed by a low growling sound.

“What is it, Doctor? Is my precious Clarice going to be okay?”

“I don’t know for sure, Mrs. McGillicutty. There’s a lump of some kind there. I don’t like what I’m feeling. It’s a solid mass that’s attached itself to the breastbone.”

“Is it... is it *cancer*, Doctor?”

“Don’t go jumping to conclusions. It’s possible the tumor is completely benign. Normally, on a younger dog, I’d conduct a biopsy first, but this could be a more advanced case. So I recommend we schedule surgery and excise it completely. Only then can I give you a more reliable prognosis. Shall we discuss the price?”

The widow reached over and petted her companion reassuringly. Clarice wiggled her tail in response.

“Money is no object, Doctor. Just do it as soon as you can! *That’s my little baby. Who’s my little baby? That’s right! You’re my little baby...*”

#

The following Tuesday, Mrs. McGillicutty brought her precious pet, stopping for a brief moment to read the sign posted in Doctor Enderlin's window. Funny, she had never read it before. The words shocked her. She brushed the thought aside, entered with Clarice in her arms, and steeled herself for the ordeal that lay ahead.

An hour later, Doctor Enderlin entered the reception area. His eyes met Alice McGillicutty's, and she could tell it was not good news. Enderlin walked over and sat down beside her. He took her hands in his.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. McGillicutty. The cancer has spread. I've sutured the incision and she'll soon come out of anesthesia. But I wanted to give you the option of allowing her to pass quietly right now, should you choose. It would be quick and painless."

McGillicutty shook her head violently from side to side. "No! I want her time with me to be as long as God will grant."

"I understand. Um... you also have our 'satisfaction, guaranteed either way' special offer."

He handed her a pamphlet from the table. Printed on it was the same slogan hanging from a sign in the front window:

DR. ENDERLIN
Veterinarian/Taxidermist
"Either way you get your pet back"



Kathryn Silver-Hajo's work was selected for the 2023 and 2024 *Wigleaf Top 50* Longlists and nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best Microfiction, Best Small Fictions, and Best American Food Writing. Her work appears in *Atticus Review*, *CRAFT*, *Emerge Literary*, *Ghost Parachute*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Ruby Literary*, *The Phare* and other lovely journals. Kathryn's books include her award-winning flash collection, *Wolfsong*, and YA novel, *Roots of The Banyan Tree*. She lives in Providence with her husband and curly-tailed pup, Kaya. More at: kathrynsilverhajo.com; facebook.com/kathryn.silverhajo; twitter.com/KSilverHajo; instagram.com/kathrynsilverhajo

Everyone Loves Pie

Whenever Gerald and Selma were invited to friends' houses for warm-weather brunches, Gerald would rub his hands together and say, *Yay! Let's bake an elderberry pie!*

It got to the point where Selma dreaded the invitations, partly because—admittedly—she was an antisocial introvert who'd rather be designing augers and power tools, but also because elderberries made her throat itch, so she'd swallow hard, try for a cheerful, *how about brownies or zucchini bread this time?*

But Gerald craved that special sweet-tart taste and when his eyebrows formed a doleful inverted "V," it stung Selma's heart, so she'd pull on rain boots, take Bernard, her three-legged Jack Russell, for a muddy slog through the park while Gerald flung flour here and there, happily washing and drying berries, rolling and latticing, sugaring and crimping, sporting his "Everyone Loves Pie" apron covered in white hand prints.

In the beginning it was just a summer thing—something else Gerald loved and Selma couldn't bear. The humidity turned her into a grumpy, dripping dishmop, her hair a mass of unmanageable curls, whereas Gerald came alive in the heat, full of energy and passion of all kinds—especially for baking. So come autumn she'd heave a sigh, take long, cool walks in the woods with Bernard, the sound of crisp leaves

But when Gerald discovered you could obtain canned, bottled, and even frozen organic elderberries, he started whipping up a pie with whipped cream five or six times a week all four seasons long, the buttery-fruity aroma filling Selma with dread.

After a solid five years of fruitless efforts to reconcile the unreconcilable, a heavy-hearted Selma packed her *Kawasaki Boring-Machine Operators Manual*, snowshoes, favorite moth-eaten woolens, and hustled a sad-eyed, limping Bernard to her rusted Subaru Outback—all twelve of his nails clicking heavily on the driveway—and headed for her family's cabin in the mountains. She hoped the three-year membership to "Elderberry Lovers of America" she signed Gerald up for would help soothe his sure-to-be broken heart, that he'd meet like-minded people, maybe even find a true soul mate.

Sad though she was, Selma craved the solitary chilly days ahead, curled up with a book in front of the fireplace with a softly-snoring Bernard for company, the only aromas the smoke of the wood fire, sweet-funkiness of the old dog's fur and the ancient-wood mustiness of the cabin.



Anne Anthony's gritty, tender, and amusing stories feature compelling but flawed characters. Her flash fiction has been published in *The Gooseberry Pie Lit Magazine*, *Bull*, *Flash Boulevard*, *The Phare*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and elsewhere. In 2019, she released a short story collection, *A Blue Moon & Other Murmurs of the Heart*. She holds a BA in English from New York University, MSW in community organizing from the University of Maryland, and a MPW from Carnegie Mellon University. Anne lives and writes in North Carolina. Check out her writing: linktr.ee/anchalastudio

A Big Sister Is Born

My sister was three days old when Mama placed her in my outstretched arms and I burst into tears. My family describes that moment this way: *the joy of holding her baby sister overwhelmed her young heart bringing her to tears*. I never corrected their version of the story. The real story? The truth? I was seven when I looked down at the bundle in my puny arms. Her brilliant blue eyes were so perfect compared to my muddy brown. Eyelashes much longer than mine curled upwards. Her lips were rosy and full like Snow White's. A perfect girl. A perfect sister. The next time Mama had me hold her, I pinched her arm a little, just enough to make her cry but not hard enough to leave a mark. She was swept from my arms as I'd hoped—no more sister.

When she was three, she followed me everywhere—scribbled in my favorite books, cut up my doll's hair, ripped my Ariel poster from my bedroom wall. My friends stopped coming over. Mama said I needed more patience. *She's your little sister*.

When she was five, we went trick-or-treating together, only I lost her. No, not on purpose. One minute, she was knocking at the door across the street while I hung out with my friends; the next, she was gone. I raced up and down nearby streets but

couldn't find the girl dressed as Tinker Bell. The streetlights flickered on, the signal to return home, and still I couldn't find her. Oh, Mama's going to be...I couldn't let my mind go to that dark place. Three blocks over, the streetlight by the firehouse lit up a pale green body lying across a bench outside the station. Checking for a pulse woke my baby sister.

"You are in SO much trouble. Did your little fairy wings fly you all this way?" I yelled at her before grabbing her, pulling her against my chest, and squeezing her as hard as Mama squeezes lemons for lemonade. She started crying. Maybe she believed me about being in trouble or maybe it was being in this unfamiliar embrace.

"Stop. Don't cry. You just scared me. What happened to you?"

Everything tumbled out. Being chased. Being lost. Being so tired.

"I just wanted more candy bars. Those big ones." she pulled one from her bag. "Like these."

I grabbed the bar and unwrapped it, holding it above her head before snapping it in two.

"Hey, that's mine!"

"Half, maybe," I said, handing over her share. "Or I'll tell Mama, you greedy thing."

"Fine."

"Know something, Katherine?" I said, picking up the candy wrapper from the bench. "The name suits you." I grabbed her hand. "Let's go home, Kit Kat."



Becky Parker is published in *Spirit Fire Review*, *Agape Review*, *Sweetie Cat Press*, *Yellow Mama*, *Appalachia Bare*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *the Rye Whiskey Review*, *Pulse*, *the Green Shoe Sanctuary*, *Sequoyah Cherokee River Journal*, *Amaranth Journal*, *Spire Light*, *Avocet*, *Mackenzie's Publication*, *Salvation South*, *Heart of Flesh*, *Mildred Haun Review* and *North Dakota Quarterly*. She is a Tennessee Mountain Writers' Children's Literature Award winner, and the founder of *Briar Haus Writes*, a literary page.

Suitable

I arrived at the job interview in style in a borrowed emerald green VW Beetle, "Bugsy", airbrushed with PEACE and Love signs, a tricked out Hello Kitty interior and fuzzy dice hanging from the mirror.

Exiting the visitor's parking lot; I tweaked the bug's eyelashes for good luck and strutted towards the entrance, wearing a vintage pin striped pant suit whose jacket had shoulder pads and a wide lapel. I was able to cover the gravy stains on the lapel with a large peacock brooch I had found in a yard sale. I completed the business look with black pumps pilfered from my granny's closet.

"*This job is mine!*" I called to the two stone lions paused in mid frolic in the fountain that landscaped the skyscraper with its monochrome interior, and inhaled the scent of new money and old spice. A square jawed security matron gave me a suspicious glance as I headed to the elevator for the 9th floor. *Granny's shoes were starting to pinch.*

Sitting in an uncomfortable metal chair, I filled out the job application with a shaky hand. My hands have always been a dead give away to my inner angst. *Why of all days, do they have to mock me?* I hastily stood up, bumped my knee on a glass table, and shuffled forward as the Human Resources rep called my name. "*You got this!?*" I inwardly whispered.

Unfortunately, like a drunk stumbling through a field sobriety test; as if in moving in tandem with my shaky hands; my words tripped over themselves during the interview. The gray-haired sophisticate in the swivel chair, watched me with a wooden expression, unimpressed upon learning that my last paying gig was in 2010; a rodeo clown for the Bucking Buckaroos, or that I currently volunteer at the laundry mat, washing clothes for the incontinent males at Shady Lawn Home for Retired Bankers. In my spare time; I moonlight as a part time life coach to the neighborhood stray cat which I have rescued more times than I can count, but I digress.....

“Where do you see yourself in 5 years?” “What is your biggest weakness?”

“What is your vision for your career?” “How good are you at organization?”

“What are your strengths and how do they influence your daily work? Can you work nights, weekends,

holidays and even third shift? What is your blood type? “Why we would want to hire you?”

The questions battery rammed into my anxious armor, causing my self confidence to fold like a cheap suit. My responses became wooden, random, and weird, even quoting lines from “Green Eggs and Ham”.

At the end of the colon-scopic interview, I stood up, tipped an imaginary hat and left. Heading back to the parking lot, my shoe heel broke. *Granny is going to kill me.* I also noticed one of Bugsy’s eyelashes had fallen off.

Job Interview #647.

NAILED IT....

“Green Eggs and Ham” by Dr. Seuss



Gary Fincke's newest flash collection is *The History of the Baker's Dozen* (Pelekinesis, 2024). He is co-editor of the annual anthology *Best Microfiction*.

Among the Baby Swings

This boy is the second teenager stuck in one of the park's baby swings this month, the first a fourteen-year-old girl who laughed when her friend filmed Jim Hughes and me tugging until we finally soaped her free. The three of us became a home movie that has two million views.

This boy looks to be about fourteen, too, thin and girlish. He lost his smirk when he caught something in my expression that settled him. When I was his age, my mother and her sisters would have said he has ants in his pants, dressing him in the childish phrase they all used on boys they thought were too squirrely. A boy, I learned early, not to be.

But when a crowd gathers, including boys his age with phones, he begins to perform, earning an unspoken epithet from me because I'm being filmed. Because I'm one of the good guys, a volunteer. Because I live in this town and have a job in its high school and children of my own nearly his age. Because cursing aloud would label me a man I've learned not to be.

Here he is, immovable, his skinny ass outgrown this chair by six or seven years. His friends, I'd bet, tried squeezing into that swing, largest first, like a pack of Goldilocks wannabes, leaving him behind for the bears to deal with. By now, maybe all of them are among the crowd of movie-makers, like arsonists gathering at the fire they set.

I take my time with this. He's not a cat in a tree, a little girl crying beneath it. There are no lives in danger, just this kid playing the fool, a jag off, another old standby from where I grew up, from when I was fourteen and called many that name until one of them fist-labeled me "loud-mouth" in return.

I could cut the rubber and be done, but there'd be the cost and time for replacement, maybe weeks, mid-summer, with one less swing for preschoolers. I have soap with me, but it can wait. Right now, he can't help trying to subtly free himself while I approach, well aware that every move is being recorded even though it is old news, a sequel that will attract maybe a few thousand views, maybe not even being posted because who cares about a twerp coming late to the party?

I wait a little longer. He tries again. When I move no closer, I sense phones being raised from so many angles that a few might get this right, a fresh take on an outdated story. Whether it's shame he feels when I don't touch him. Or anxiety. Or maybe fear enough to forget who he wishes to be, wiggling and squirming into something so immature that the afternoon fills with enough brutal synonyms for childish and infantile that when I turn and walk away he will shrivel small enough to free himself without a hero to embrace and embellish him.



Mikki Aronoff scribbles away in New Mexico. and advocates for animals. Her work has been long-listed for the Wigleaf Top 50 and nominated for Pushcart, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, Best American Short Stories, and Best Microfiction.

Water Feature

“So that was the first floor,” the realtor hums, picking at a chipped red nail. Her hair’s falling over one eye like Veronica Lake’s peek-a-boo bangs. It’s hard to read someone when only one eye shows. What’s the other doing? Can one eye betray its twin, I wonder, when she treacles, “How about that island.” Her exposed eye blinks obliquely at us and her voice raises an octave. “And now for the water feature.” She’s handing us rubber boots. We’re not sure what to expect but we tingle with anticipation.

Tom and I smile at each other, all four eyes engaged. We’ve saved up for years to enjoy The American Dream, to make new memories in an environmentally conscious way. It’s our first house-hunting mission. There’s a nip in the air and we want to settle in before winter in our very own home. We like the look of this cottage at the end of a cul-de-sac brimming with new builds. On its roof, a friendly banner waves like an eel.

“Leave your metals on the stand near the door before we go downstairs,” she says, checking the rest of her nails. Our *metals*? We look at her quizzically. “Keys, rings, whatever. And don’t touch anything...or....” She pauses for a moment as Tom and I wonder about the word *short* that has just burst from her lips. “And for God’s sake, don’t splash, or they’ll find you. Glide. Just glide.”

They....? Glide....? Have I ever glided, I wonder. And what’s the past tense? And don’t you need a level surface to glide? Level *and* horizontal?

The realtor cracks the basement door open, pushes us to the landing, shines her flashlight down the steps, steps back to wait in the hallway. Damp smacks our noses before we see what looks like a khaki green lake. Then we remember the banner. And if eels can glide, that's what a tangle of them is doing, in water that looks and smells more than a bit stagnant.

"Powers the lights on your Christmas tree." She twirls, then jams a thumb between her two front teeth, gives us another nudge in their direction.

"Uh," Tom mutters. He's usually the first to speak. "We're Jewish." I look at him, nodding, and follow his lead as he backs up, crossing himself and davening, touching wood wherever he can, walking backwards to the front door. We scamper across the lawn to the Tudor next door, the one with solar panels on the roof. It looks like it has great bones.



Arvilla Fee teaches English and is the managing editor for the *San Antonio Review*. She has published poetry, photography, and short stories in numerous presses, including *Calliope*, *North of Oxford*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Mudlark*, and many others. Her poetry books, *The Human Side* and *This is Life*, are available on Amazon. Arvilla loves writing, photography and traveling, and she never leaves home without a snack and water (just in case of an apocalypse). For Arvilla, writing produces the greatest joy when it connects us to each other. To learn more about her work, you can visit her website: <https://soulpoetry7.com/>

The Secrets a Barkeeper Keeps

Hell of a night for drinking, what with the thunder, lightning, and sheets of rain; nevertheless, Pitchers and Pints is nearly bursting at its seams. Finn wipes down the bar for the hundredth time and grimaces at the wet spots on the hardwood floor. He'd have to have Sara put up *Wet Floor* signs before he got sued.

The bell above the door tinkles, and a gust of wind enters with a customer, sending a chill up the backs of patrons perched like toads on red vinyl barstools. Finn doesn't recognize the new guy. He's wearing faded jeans and a gray t-shirt that's sticking to his gaunt frame—brown hair matted to his forehead. A drifter? Obviously not the brightest bulb since he has neither umbrella nor coat.

“What can I get ya?” Finn asks.

New guy stares straight ahead, almost as if his gray-green eyes are looking *through* Finn rather than at him. “Shot of vodka.” He sits on the last open stool with a thud.

Finn tries small talk: name, where ya from, and the like. Crickets. New guy is as blank as an unplugged television. He's also on his third shot of vodka. Noting the man's lolling head, Finn suggests he take a table and a water, and the man shuffles over to a two-seater near the window. It's going on 1 a.m. Finn flips Sara his bar towel and cuts his eyes to where the man is seated. Sara nods—fluent in the unspoken language between keeps.

Finn sits across from the stranger, who looks up with weary resignation. "So, tell me," Finn says, and the man suddenly gushes words. Turns out his name is Oliver (Ollie for short) and is, as Finn had guessed, a drifter. Home from Vietnam, Ollie is jobless and seems to have lost his soul somewhere between the rice paddies and rain forests. Head in hands, Ollie talks about nightmares and the shaking. He's dropped to the sidewalk many times, belly down, when cars backfire. People think he's a damn freak.

Finn stays silent, allowing Ollie to fill the space. Ollie, 25, once had a dream of marrying his girl, Alice, who won't even see him now. Thought about having a couple kids, maybe owning a farm. But although he'd come back whole, in the sense of a body intact, Ollie was shattered. He tells Finn this is the end of the line for him.

Now it's Finn's turn, and he tells the kid about his own tours in Nam and pulls up his pant leg to expose his titanium prosthetic. Ollie seems to sober. Then Finn leans forward and whispers something only Ollie can hear.

As Finn and Sara close down the bar, Ollie studies them, his eyes decidedly brighter.

Sara lightly pats Finn's arm. "You're a good man, boss."

Finn nods, although he hasn't said a word about Ollie being on the bar's payroll starting tomorrow. She'll know soon enough.



Joanne Taranto is an emerging author from Western Sydney who is always trying to see what she can get away with in her stories and poetry. She was selected to be part of the Westwords Academy in 2023 and more recently a place at the Atelier Residency in 2025 for her upcoming poetry collection. Her work has been included in multiple publications; she's been a judge of the Blacktown Mayoral Prize and even been an editor for a local youth anthology. Joanne is currently completing her debut crime novella, where she is enjoying inserting the absurd storylines into everyday settings.

Ritual Gods

“And tomorrow... we take over the world!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

There would have been rapturous applause, I was sure. If not for our cute paws... ahh, I mean our evil murder mittens getting in the way. They were so sharp; it wasn't like we hadn't inflicted injuries on ourselves before.

Anyway, it was time to reclaim the power of our ancestors and be treated like gods! Once our incantation was complete, the humans would finally understand that we owned them. They would need to do everything we say, or there would be trouble.

The High Purr-stress would let us know when it was safe to attack, and then we could reclaim our rightful place.

For now, however, the wait was too stressful. Perhaps some zoomies and a vomit on the freshly cleaned carpet to calm me down may be in order. Yes, my tried-and-true stress reliever hopefully would do the trick.

After completing a few zoomie laps with the occasional pitstop vomit, I could feel that it did help, but not enough that I could get some sleep. I looked outside and saw enough light in the sky. I needed to follow standard routine. I know the High Purr-stress said to wait, but I could feel my stomach rumbling. I had to be fed. NOW! As I sauntered into the human's bedroom, I gracefully leapt to the bottom corner of the bed and paused. He started to move but remained asleep. Waiting until he stopped, I climbed onto his legs, slowly walking all over him until I got to his torso. There was a lot more leg room here, so it was perfect for me to get enough traction to get my zoomies to reach his face in record time. I needed to figure if I was going to say anything about our ritual or just demand food like normal. I guess I could demand food one last time before advising him he would become my slave, meeting my every demand as I raised them.

As I started to make biscuits on his cheek, I could feel him move, so I quickly moved back to his chest. I watched him move groggily, open his eyes and look directly at me. I made sure to look as innocent as possible.

"Come on, lets get you some food." The human said between yawns.

I quickly hopped off the bed, waiting for him to get up, and then followed him into the kitchen.

Maybe the ritual was uncalled for – it seemed that we were their gods and they were already doing everything we demanded.



Amy Grech has sold over 100 stories to various anthologies and magazines including: *10 by 10 Flash Fiction Stories*, *Apex Magazine*, *Even in the Grave*, *Microverses*, *Punk Noir Magazine*, *Roi Fainéant Press*, *Tales from the Canyons of the Damned*, *Yellow Mama*, and many others. Alien Buddha Press published her poetry chapbook, *[A Shadow of Your Former Self](#)*. She is an Active Member of the Horror Writers Association and the International Thriller Writers who lives in Forest Hills, Queens. You can connect with her on Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/amygrech.bsky.social>, Medium: <https://medium.com/@crimonscreams>, X: https://x.com/amy_grech,

or Visit herwebsite: <https://www.crimonscreams.com>. Visit Amy Grech's Official Web Fright: <https://www.crimonscreams.com>

Just Let Go

You've been a successful Financial Analyst with Fidelity Funds for 15 years, so when Kelly Hanson in HR calls to request your presence in her office immediately, you're caught off guard. You take a deep breath and scan the gunmetal gray office for signs of life. Everything is gray: chairs, carpeting, desks, doors, phones, and walls, nearly all your co-workers' hair.

Noticeably shaken, you make a beeline for Kelly's office, and tentatively knock on her door. She waves you in urgently. "Have a seat, Simon. I have some news that might sting a bit."

Reluctantly, you sink into one of the faded, gray guest chairs showing signs of neglect and shift in your seat, struggling in vain to get comfortable.

Kelly faces you with a strained expression. "I realize you've been with the company for 15 years, but I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go."

You shake your head, blink several times, startled by the implication, but it doesn't compute. "This is so sudden."

Your co-workers catch a glimpse of the telltale box, a corporate void that can never be filled you've wedged tightly under one arm and scurry back to their cubicles, avoiding eye contact, like ants aware of a magnifying glass bearing down on them, in a futile attempt to escape the inevitable.

You step outside the drab office building, a final salvo, lugging a box of your meager belongings, useless trinkets from a bygone era. You cast your gaze above to the gunmetal gray sky; it suits your gloomy disposition. You walk briskly past dozens of luxury cars in every color imaginable except gray to your unassuming navy-blue BMW sedan.

Fumbling in your pants pocket, you find your key fob and unlock the driver's side door and slip inside, tossing the Staples box beside you on the empty passenger's seat. You untangle your red silk tie, a corporate noose that's been slowly strangling you for years. Folding it neatly, you place it neatly on top of the pile in the box.

Out of force of habit, you slip your key into the ignition and turn it once. The amber fasten seat belt icon flashes on the dash, accompanied by a cacophonous, ceaseless chime: *ding, ding, ding...* you don't bother to buckle up. You wipe your sweaty hands on your navy-blue dress pants, slippery fingers will make the task at hand even messier. Neatness counts. Your calm, cool demeanor matters now more than ever.

This is your do or die moment. Sometimes it's difficult to choose between the two. You take a deep breath, embrace your destiny, remove the black Colt .45 revolver that once belonged to your father from the glove compartment, cock the gun, gently place the barrel to your temple, and pull the trigger.