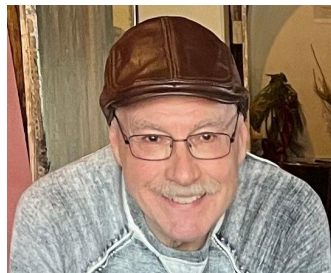


10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



Welcome to Issue #22. Unique stories highlight this issue with as usual, ten extremely talented flash fiction writers. Each have their individual style and creativity. Some have appeared in 10 By 10 before and we are fortunate they have chosen to write for us again. Some of the authors represent different areas such as South Africa, Illinois, Massachusetts, Canada and New Jersey. Sit back and enjoy these ten excellent stories

Zvi A. Sesling

Editor



Zvi A. Sesling, Brookline, MA Poet Laureate (2017-2020), has published numerous poems and flash fiction. He edits *Muddy River Poetry Review* and *10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories*. Sesling has won international and national poetry prizes. He is a five-time poetry Pushcart Prize nominee and was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize for his flash fiction story “Chili Man” which is in his latest book *40 Stories* co-authored with Paul Beckman. His other flash fiction is the chapbook *Wheels* and the full volume *Secret Behind The Gate*, which was nominated for the Mass Center for the Book Award. He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



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 by Alien Buddha Press in March of 2023.

The Mystery of the Blue Post-It Note

I was planning to write about something, I’m just not sure what...

Give me a moment to think.

It’s never easy to watch an old friend lose his powers, especially when that old friend is your memory.

In fact, I was saying this to myself just yesterday, standing on the stairs in my condo. I had stopped to pick up a little blue Post-It Note with a single word hastily scrawled.

“Zukor” it said.

The handwriting was mine so I knew I had written it; I just couldn’t remember why. There was only one Zukor that came to mind and that was Adolph Zukor, a pioneer of early motion pictures, and I could not think of any reason why I’d write his name on a Post-It Note.

I should explain this penchant I have for littering my condo with Post-It Notes. At the age of 77, I suffer from frequent failings of memory, so I’ve started...

Wait a minute, did I say 77? I meant 78! I’m sure I turned 78 last June.

See what I mean about memory...!

It’s not unusual for me to leave myself reminders about things I need to do, and place them where they will do the most good. The fact that the Zukor note was found halfway up the stairs probably means I left it to be read going up to bed, or to catch my attention when I went down to begin a new day.

Yes, I know—what good is a reminder if you can’t remember what it means?

My point exactly, which is why I’ve recently taken to writing longer reminders.

“Wash in dryer” I regard as a classic since it can be used to both remind me to put a wash in the dryer and to take it out. So much better than its tight-lipped predecessor, “Wash”.

And every night before sleep, I reach over to turn off the light and there on my lamp is the question, “Did you take your Zocor?” reminding me to take my nightly dose of cholesterol medication.

Oh, sorry, but I misspoke when I said I had three children. Actually, there are four. I think what happens is I leave Darlene out from the count. She was not a particularly pleasant child.

But what was I saying...?

Oh yes, I was trying to remember the subject of my next essay—which brought me back to yesterday standing in the middle of the staircase lamenting my sad loss of faculties brought on by merely staying alive for 77, maybe 78, years. And as I stood there staring at the blue Post-It Note with its mysterious message, another question came to mind.

It was a simple question. Not about the subject of my essay or the meaning of life, but rather a more immediate and practical question.

Where the hell was I going when I stopped to pick up the Zukor note?

And more to the point, was I heading upstairs or down?



Cindy Rosmus originally hails from the Ironbound section of Newark, NJ, once voted the “unfriendliest city on the planet.” She talks like Anybodys from *West Side Story* and everybody from *Saturday Night Fever*. Her noir/horror/bizarro stories have been published in places like *Shotgun Honey*, *Megazine*, *Dark Dossier*, *Danse Macabre*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *Under the Bleachers*, *Punk Noir*, and *Rock and a Hard Place*. She is the editor/art director of *Yellow Mama* and has published seven collections of short stories. Cindy is a Gemini, a Christian, and an animal rights advocate.

PERRY MASON NIGHT

She loved Perry Mason, not my Pop.

To Mom, Perry Mason was real. Not an actor, or fictional character. In crisp, clear black and white, that face filled our TV screen. Not fat and jowly, like when the actor got old. Young, handsome, and wise. And when something amused him . . .

“I love it!” she squealed, “When he smiles!”

Like a teenager. Like my cousin Kathy over guys in black leather jackets.

“Look, Mary!” Scaring me out of my sleep. “He’s smiling ‘cos he knows who the real murderer is.”

I was seven, on the worn pull-out couch. No room of my own. That thundering piano music. Her always yelling. Didn't she care that I had to get up for school?

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. From the bedroom, Pop snored loudly.

"Shut up!" Mom yelled. If I wasn't awake now, I would've been. "I can't hear my show." Pop kept on snoring.

I dreaded school. Kids called me "Fatso." And Sister Stephen with that pointer. "Get up to that board!" If we got the answer wrong, she'd slap us. She was so mean.

Meaner than that D.A. on Mom's show. Hamilton Burger. Sneering know-it-all.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Mom yelled at the screen. "She didn't do it! Burger, you bastard! Leave her alone!"

"Will you shut up?" Pop yelled from the bedroom.

My stomach growled. I shouldn't be hungry, not after bedtime. That's what everybody said.

Sometimes it felt like food was all I had.

Uncle Markie, Mom's brother, was the meanest. "Put a lock on that fridge," he'd told Mom. So I'd lose weight. Like he really cared . . .

When I'd caught him in his house, with his pants down, he smiled.

Like Perry Mason.

"I told you, Mary." Mom joined me on the couch. "Perry knew who killed that rich guy. And why." She pulled my covers up to her chin. "He won again."

The bedroom door opened.

On his way to the bathroom, Pop glared at her.

The last scene was in an Italian restaurant, with a fat, mustached guy in charge. At a table was Perry Mason and that secretary. Della Street, who I thought looked like Mom, in pictures, before she'd married Pop. They were sitting close.

"Don't tell me . . ." Mom sounded mad. "There's nothing going on."

Again, my stomach growled.

I looked closer, to see what they were eating.

"Bitch," she muttered, as Pop walked past.



Sean Patrick Ryan is a person who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, but lives in recovery, in part, thanks to his parents' support and anti-psychotic medication. When he got sick, twenty years ago, he took up writing in order to “make himself useful” and avoid the shame of total “unemployment”. He learned that he is a slow learner, but he has been published twice, once with a short essay and another time with a fiction story that was exactly 50 words. He has found that the better he has gotten at writing, the more access he has to places to submit and to a steady stream of productivity. He is excited, every day, to write and edit and, most importantly, submit. He thanks the readers for their valuable time.

An Ocean for a Grave

He was on a boat floating somewhere off the coast of San Clemente. He wanted to die. It had been a long forty-two years and there were going to be no more birthdays for him. Those types of celebrations were among the worst experiences of his life because he knew that there were only a limited number of ages a person could attain, and with each passing year—it was one birthday closer to extinction.

His dunking was planned for 4:30 P.M. on the Fourth of July, 2019. He was going to tie up his legs with a rope and have a weight attached to it. He would drop into the ocean. Game over.

This end was not something he was proud of, but things had just gotten too out of control for him to handle. He turned off the motor and looked at his face in a mirror. It was bad. This look had been one that had developed over the years and it came from lots of depression, and chemicals, in pill form, that wore him down rather than lift him up.

He looked over at the bench seat where there was the length of rope, coiled up, next to the forty-five-pound weight. Next to the death supplies he had placed a bottle of his favorite vodka. He figured it might be nice to go out with a simple surrender to liquor and the depths of the vast ocean as he sunk down into oblivion. The abyss was not far off. Six minutes more.

Sitting on the bench, he picked up the vodka and unscrewed the cap. He drank from the bottle. It tasted like death. He loved it. All the alcohol that was going to go into his belly had been sent there and now it was time to get down to business. He took the rope and stuck one end through the center hole of the weight. It was not hard to tie up the rope to his ankles. He moved himself into position. He took his watch off and laid it on the edge of the boat, but where it would not fall in and get lost. His emotions got the best of him and he took one gasp in mourning for the forty-two years that had not been happy ones, but he did not need to think anymore. There was one minute before he would go into the water.

He recited Psalm 23 to himself. It started, "The Lord is my shepherd," and ended, "and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

His watch ticked over to 4:30 P.M. and he tossed the weight into the water. He was quickly pulled down into the abyss. It was more than 250 feet to the bottom. Within eight minutes he was dead. Never to be again. He had never wanted to live, but now his life was a moot point.

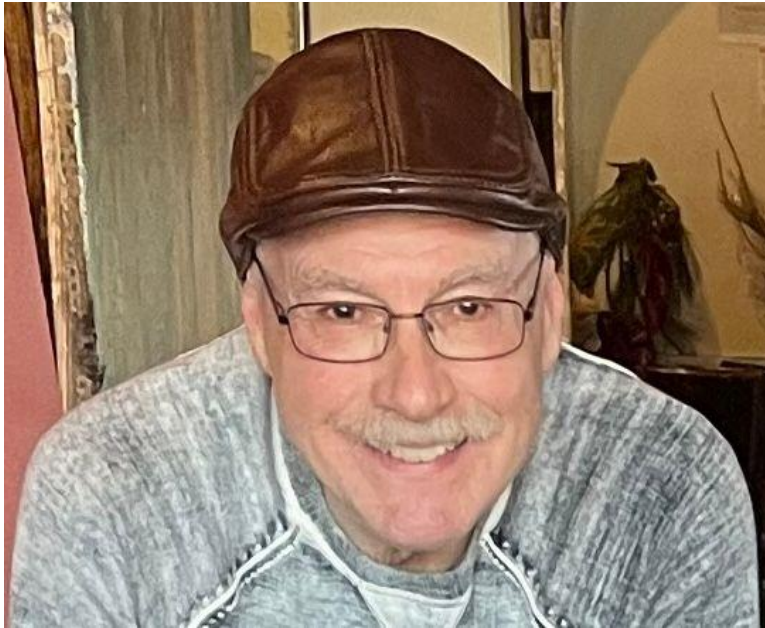
Time of death, 4:38:21 P.M.



Louella Lester is a writer/photographer in Winnipeg, Canada, author of *Glass Bricks* (At Bay Press 2021), contributing editor at *New Flash Fiction Review*, and is included in Best Microfiction 2024.

Filling Holes

This time all his friends just happen to be busy the very day he's moving and only one friend, the one who owns the truck, has the guts to be honest. "No damn way, I told you last time was the last time. You're always changing the wrong thing, man." Joel takes a deep breath, shrugs his shoulders and walks away, then books a moving company. The next week, he's at the old apartment, having cleaned out his bank account to pay the movers, cleaning up the mess he's managed to accumulate over the past year, because now he really does need that damage deposit. With every sweep of the broom, swish of the mop, scrub of the toilet, he feels better, until he's fairly tripping down the hall, tube of toothpaste in one hand, putty knife in the other. With each dab and scrape, he fills another hole in the wall. Cheating girlfriend. Gone. Lousy job. Gone. Judgemental parents. Gone. The weight gain. Gone. Soon he's so light that his curly mess of hair brushes the ceiling as he floats across the living room to open the window, letting out the minty smell, hoping the apartment manager won't catch on. He makes sure to dump every tack and nail he's found into the garbage bin before he flies to the new apartment to start again.



David Henson and his wife have lived in Brussels and Hong Kong and now reside in Illinois. His work has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes, Best of the Net and two Best Small Fictions and has appeared in various journals including *10 by 10 Flash Fiction Stories*, *Maudlin House*, *Gastropoda*, *Literally Stories*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Gone Lawn* and *Moonpark Review*. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>.

Superheroes

Each Wednesday my mother and I walked to the everything else store. My dad called it that because my parents bought all our groceries there except for fruits and vegetables from a farmers' market. I don't remember my exact age, but I was young enough to hold my mother's hand crossing streets and not old enough to be embarrassed about it.

My father would meet my mother and me at the everything else store after his shift, which punched in before dawn. I always knew when my father was getting ready for work. He was quiet, but our house was small, and a fuzzy line of light would appear under my bedroom door.

As soon as Mom and I entered the grocery store, I'd reach forward and fly between skyscrapers of canned vegetables and soup, sling my web and swing, dash like a flash.... The destination was always the same: the comic book counter in back, my portal to the realms of Gotham and Metropolis.

After about an hour, my mother would ease me out of my fantasy world ... for the most part. I'd retain enough super strength to hulk her heaped cart to the checkout, where we'd meet my father, his hands pink from scrubbing the factory

from them. Once he showed up with his arm slick with salve from where he brushed against a hot weld.

Looking back, I'm surprised my father wasn't injured more often. I was in the plant with Mom once. We took Dad his sack lunch, which he'd left on the kitchen table. Huge machines spewed sparks; a haze stung my eyes; the workers ate salt; loud clangs made me wince more than Sister Martha's ruler. The place might not've been the Hell we were taught to fear, but was as close as I ever wanted to be. I got why my father looked forward to his weekends.

At some point, the everything else store launched a promotion: Spend enough and get a free volume of an encyclopedia set. The books, my parents believed, would help propel me to a better future. They got a volume every week.

Once my folks completed the set, they displayed it in our home in a second-hand bookcase. They told visiting friends and relatives one day they'd crown the collection with a college diploma, the first in the family.

One Saturday, a door-to-door encyclopedia salesperson came knocking. My folks invited him inside, not risky back then. His sample boasted glossy paper, color photos and longer entries. Even at my age, I could see our volumes were sidekicks compared to this superhero edition. When my dad said we already had encyclopedias, the guy smirked and said something like *Don't you want the best for your son?* My father's face turned the color of a pepper from the farmer's market. Then Dad took a deep breath and placed an order.

There was a fuzzy line of light under my bedroom door for several Saturday mornings after that.



Ellie O’Leary is the author of *Breathe Here* (poetry, 2020) and *Up Home Again* (memoir, 2023) – both with North Country Press. She lives in Massachusetts where she is the Education Director of the Gloucester Writers Center and the Poet Laureate Emerita of Amesbury. Ellie teaches in the Women’s Writing Retreat at the Pyramid Life Center in Paradox, NY and facilitates the Fall Writerfest there. Her MFA in Poetry is from the University of Southern Maine’s Stonecoast Program. She’s currently working on a collection of short stories with the work-in-progress title *Honey of Freedom* and a poetry collection tentatively titled *Lovely, Just Lovely*. www.EllieOLEary.com.

Lumberjack For a Day

Most of the houses in town were clustered in the village, but some people also owned wood lots outside the village or in one of the other towns nearby. This is why Josie knew about that sort of thing even before she heard about it in a poem in school.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though.

Her friend Flora’s father worked the woods in a wood lot in Montville, the next town over. One summer when Josie and Flora were about twelve years old, he hired them for the day to remove the bark from the trees he cut. For a change, Josie didn’t think a lot about it beforehand. She thought a day in the woods would be fun and he was going to pay them fifty cents a tree. So off they went, the two of them along with Darryl, Flora’s Dad, in the front seat of his logging truck. He owned these woods; he worked these woods. He harvested trees the way people pick the tomatoes or the berries that are ripe. Trees took longer to get ready, but Josie was thinking it was pretty much the same idea. First, he would select the tree, then decide where he wanted it to fall. On that side of the tree, he’d cut a notch. Then he went around to the other side of the tree and cut through. Each tree collapsed onto the notch and landed right where he wanted - every time.

Flora's father did this part with his chain saw and it took him next to no time to fell the tree.

Logs would go to the paper mill in four-foot lengths, so Flora's father cut the felled trees every four feet and then scored an incision along the length on each log. Flora and Josie slid crowbars under the slit to peel the bark away. Josie wasn't prepared for the squishy noise the bark made as it slipped off the logs. She expected a tree falling in the woods to make a noise, because she hadn't studied philosophy yet, and didn't know that would be a question, but she wasn't at all prepared for the wrenching moan of separation from the bark as it left the remains of the tree. Hearing it made her nauseous, squeamish, and then it made her vomit. Perhaps a wise woman would say she felt the pain of the tree, but Josie would say she felt a noise. Her lumberjack career lasted one day, and she never made plans to take down another tree.



Born in Manchester, UK **Deryn Graham** studied French at Exeter University. After graduating she worked holiday jobs overseas, before returning to London on the eve of her 30th birthday to look for a serious job. During a business trip to Berlin she met a South African and seven months later, quit London to join him in Johannesburg. They married and had two sons but didn't make the happy ever after. Deryn has worked as a radio and tv producer and was public relations manager for South Africa's official buy local advocacy campaign. She is a freelance writer and still lives in Johannesburg.

We Have Agency

They say that when you learn a new skill, or start a new job, you move from functioning with conscious incompetence to unconscious competence.

Belinda despaired of ever transitioning from one to the other in her new job. She had started off eager to succeed as a junior in the bright shiny star of an advertising agency run by a bunch of spoiled young hot shots, but from the very beginning, training, induction or anything resembling a staff retention programme were all woefully lacking.

There was no welcome on the day she arrived. Instead, the receptionist led her through the rabbit warren of work cubicles, apologising along the way, her embarrassment apparent in the haste with which she returned to the switchboard. Belinda's desk was strewn with papers, coffee cup stains and pencil shavings. She yanked open the drawers and found the same mess inside. She pulled out dog eared note pads, nubs of pencils, dried up highlighters, curled Post-It notes, a

functioning stapler (but no staples), and some salt and pepper sachets from the local takeaway.

She tossed the entire mess, bar the stapler, into the wastepaper bin. One way or the other she would bring order where she found chaos and would achieve exactly what she had set out to do.

Eventually, Don, the senior account manager who had hired her put his head over the partition.

“Everything OK, Belinda? Good to see you. Welcome to Balls to the Wall Advertising.”

“Good morning, Don,” she scrambled to her feet, her outstretched hand ignored. “Ah, er maybe you could just...”

“Great, well, if there’s anything you need, give me a shout. Mine’s the *corner* office,” He winked as he put the emphasis on its specific location, denoting his importance in the company’s strict pecking order.

It soon became apparent that Belinda was at the very bottom of this particular food chain. In the partners’ macho world, her coffee making skills were rated as highly as her creativity. But Belinda stayed focused, determined to make her mark and be as successful as the partners, who she could see were slowly but surely squandering their lead in the market.

She learnt that she had a real flair for the advertising world, gradually feeling the shift from knowing her shortcomings, to working instinctively. She saved any number of campaigns from disaster, stopping clients from bailing as the attention of the gifted ones drifted. She filled all the gaps when the guys were functioning below par, hungover from their work hard /play hard lifestyles.

In time, it all began to catch up with them and soon the directors of Balls to the Wall had their backs to the wall.

Belinda had the pleasure, eighteen months after starting with the company of delivering the coup de grace, single handedly out manoeuvring the entire executive team.

“Gentlemen, Balls to Wall has officially gone tits up. But if you’re interested, I’m hiring. Let me know.”

We Have Agency was born.



Coleman Bigelow's work has appeared recently in *BULL, Bending Genres, Cease, Cows, Cleaver, Gooseberry Pie Lit* and *Your Impossible Voice*. Find more at: www.colemanbigelow.com or follow him on Twitter [@ColemanBigelow](https://twitter.com/ColemanBigelow).

Thunder Loop

Fiona pats her dog, Gus, who is shuddering and shaking from the thunder. Shaking from the thunder, a silver frame, which had been a wedding present, wanders to the edge of the side table and crashes to the polished floor. The polished floor was the first spot where she and Dan had sex. Sex with Dan always left her worried he would hurt himself. Worried he will hurt himself, Fiona shoos Gus away, and fetches the broom and dustpan to clean up the mess. *The mess* was how her mother referred to her hair, her marriage, her house. *Her* house, which Fiona could never say when Dan was around.

Around the neighborhood, she'd heard the rumors about Dan and Shelly but Fiona refused to believe. "Believe it!" her mother had chirped gleefully until Fiona began to wonder. Fiona began to wonder if the frame had fallen because of the storm or something else in the room. The room to make a mess and the space to paint was all she'd wanted. All she'd wanted was her own studio, but she'd shoved aside her desires to make way for other people's dreams. Other people's dreams had dominated her house just like the silver frame from her mother. Her mother, who had lived for her unraveling, was somehow back to haunt her. It haunted her that she'd let such an unhappy person tell her what was right. Right or wrong, Fiona was finally alone.

A lone homeowner ever since she won the house in the divorce, Fiona doesn't consider herself alone as long as she has her beloved Gus. "Gus, baby" Fiona says stroking his thick Golden Retriever coat, "it's just thunder... and maybe some ghosts." Ghosts can be easily banished, Fiona thinks, standing to

retrieve the shattered picture of her mother. Her mother had always held her back. Back in front of the trash can, Fiona takes one last look and throws the picture away. A way forward begins with letting go.



Barry Yedvobnick's stories appeared in *Bending Genres*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Literally Stories*, *Litbreak Magazine*, *10 By 10 Flash Fiction*, *Dark Winter Literary Magazine* and other places. He is the recipient of a 2024 Editor's Choice Award at *Freedom Fiction Journal* and has been short-listed at several *Flash Fiction Magazine* contests. He also writes a newspaper health column and narrates science fiction stories for *AntipodeanSF* radio.

Clown Crisis

I'm made up like a clown and my seven-year-old patient, Abby, is having an asthma attack. Her father stands at the examination table, and I can tell that his confidence is not inspired by my red nose, white makeup, and the rest. He asks if I'm a doctor. I say no, holding back my first thought, *that it's Halloween and you're in a pediatric office, Bozo!*

Abby's oxygen saturation level is a dangerous eighty-five percent. She is breathing rapidly and wheezing.

"I'm a P.A.," I say. "We can talk about it later."

Terrified and struggling to suck in air, she looks away from her father. "Am I going to die?"

"No, Abby, we're going to fix you. I promise. This mask will give medicine to help. Try to relax and breathe the best you can." After several minutes of treatment, her oxygen levels are not increasing. I add oxygen to the medicine flow.

Her father turns to me. "Is she improving?"

“The oxygen will stabilize her, but she’s not responding to the treatment and fighting to breathe. We can’t let her muscles tire. She needs an emergency room, so I’m calling for an ambulance.

“Emergency room?” he says, looking me over, top to bottom, from flaming pink hair to oversized red shoes. “Are you sure? Can a doctor look at her? Maybe a few more minutes of treatment?”

“You can speak to my supervising doctor after I make the call and fill her in on Abby. I have twenty-five years of experience as a pediatric P.A. and just twenty-five days as a clown. Abby needs to go ... right now. You can ride with her.”

Later that day, I’m thrilled to learn that Abby is doing well and headed home tomorrow. The following week, I receive a thank-you note from her father. It includes a photograph of Abby sitting in the lap of a clown. The clown’s left-hand index finger is pointing to the camera. Their right arm is fully extended with a giant pink thumb pointed up. Without much facial makeup, it’s easy to see that the clown is her father.



Fiona M Jones writes very short things. Her published work is linked from her website, <https://fionamjones.wordpress.com/> .

Van Etti Publishing

“We at Van Etti Publishing are very impressed with your writing,” said the letter. “We will be delighted to accept your manuscript, A Heart Afire, for publication...”

Barbi could hardly believe her eyes. Success on the very first submission of her very first romance novel! Other writers, even the famous ones like Rowling and Atwood, had suffered rejection after rejection before finally finding a market. Could this mean that A Heart Afire was a rarer, finer, more beautiful creation than anything ever yet written? And she—Barbara Cramsby—would be rich! All debts forgotten, all worries swept away.

“I always knew...” Barbi tried to breathe. “I always knew I was destined to become the next great name in literary endeavour...”

“Just \$9985 to cover editing, layout, jacket design and production,” said the small print.

That was a shock. Barbi couldn’t afford nine thousand dollars. She’d have struggled to afford nine hundred. Or even ninety, if she was honest. But... if her book truly was great... Van Etti sounded so positive... maybe they’d at least help with some of the marketing... and... and honestly she just wanted to be able to tell her friends and family and enemies and colleagues that she was a real-life published author.

She took out her credit card.