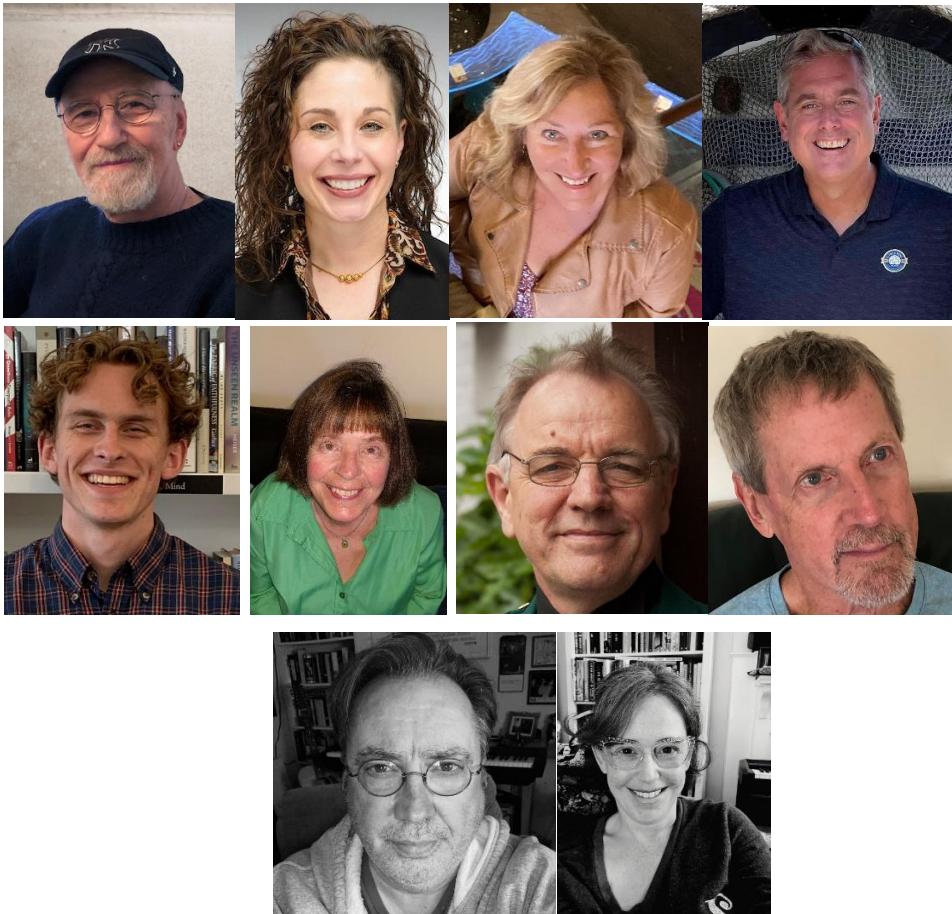


10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



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Welcome to Issue #26

One of my favorite story tellers, Robert Scotellaro, kicks off this issue which includes well known authors Gary Fincke and Bill Merkle. Each author has a particular story I enjoyed while selecting them for publication. For example, Derek McMillan's "Evil Empire" brought a laugh and all the other stories are extremely enjoyable as well. If you like the writers in this or any previous issue, Google that author and as they pop up, you might be able to get more information and leads to more of their work. It is a rewarding effort.

In the meantime pull up a comfortable chair, sit back and read these wonderful ten writers in *10 By 10*.

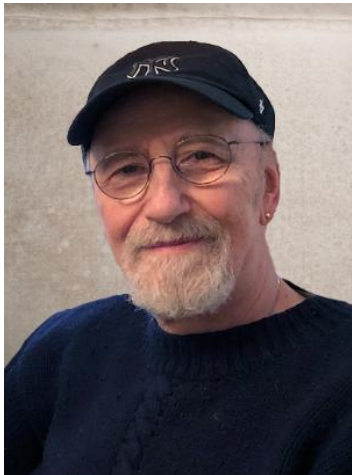
Sincerely,

Zvi A. Sesling

Editor



Zvi A. Sesling, Brookline, MA Poet Laureate (2017-2020), has published numerous poems and flash fiction. He edits *10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories*. Sesling has won international and national poetry prizes. He is a four-time Pushcart Prize poetry nominee. He has also been nominated for a flash fiction Pushcart Prize. Sesling's flash fiction book is, *Secret Behind The Gate* and his flash fiction chapbook is *Wheels*. Sesling and Paul Beckman recently collaborated on a flash fiction book *40 Stories*. Sesling lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



Robert Scotellaro is the author of 9 flash and microfiction collections, as well as 7 poetry chapbooks. Two of this collections are forthcoming: *From the Book of Atmospheres* (Bamboo Dart Press) and *The Weight of Certain Moments* (by Červená Barva Press). He has, along with James Thomas, co-edited *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction* (published by W.W. Norton). His work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies including the Norton anthologies: *Flash Fiction International* and *Flash Fiction America*, and in *5 Best Small Fictions* and *3 Best Microfiction* award anthologies. Visit him at: www.robertscotellaro.com

Unexpected (Tây Ninh Province, 1967)

She snatched my eyeglasses, leaving me fuzzy-eyed, and ran with them into the brothel. I sped after her in my clunky combat boots with my rifle swinging, but was no match for the fleet-footed snatcher running barefooted into that tiny room with a small bed in the middle of it. When I caught up with her, she handed my glasses back with her one perfect hand and I could see why she resorted to such antics. She was older than the others along the strip and one of her arms was missing just below the elbow and replaced with a hook. “I make you number one happy,” she told me and wanted the equivalence of \$2 in military currency for the privilege, and it broke my heart a little so I told her all I wanted was a song and she squinted askance, and when I told her I’d pay double she held her hand out. That one perfect one, and we sat on the bed as she tried to sing an American song about going to San Francisco with a flower in her hair she’d heard, God knew where, but I wanted one in her own language. When it came it was delicate and sweet and a bit sad. And when we did it, it was just what we both needed, even when that hook, a little cold, rested on my back. Even though my glasses smeared and I could hardly see anything the way it was anymore.



Angie Curneal Palsak loves exploring the human experience through her stories. She recently rekindled her love for writing after celebrating a milestone birthday in Venice Beach, California. Angie works at the University of Notre Dame and lives in South Bend, Indiana. When she's not working or writing, Angie and her husband love to travel, learning more about themselves along the way.

Dish It Up

Gina and I are sitting on the back porch drinking gas station coffees. Phone rings. “Dust Bunnies of Doom” I answer. “I need help with my dishes,” the wispy voice coos. \$150. One hour. Easy money, right? Been there, scrubbed that. We can do it today. Remember that toilet on Juniper Avenue? This’ll be a breeze. Famous last words.

Fancy neighborhood. Mommies are out, a baby stroller parade. We crouch down low as Gina's clunker groans, a metal cockroach amidst the gleaming SUVs. Almost eighty, not even noon. Sweat drips. Gina mutters something about the beach.

Ring doorbell. Skinny kid, hair covering one eye, opens the door, says nothing. A/C blasts. He vanishes upstairs. “Are his arms broken?” The kitchen beckons. Thousands of dollars of sneakers line the entryway, a rainbow of consumerism. Nothing surprises us anymore. Are we dead inside?

Then, the smell. A biohazard of what appears to be leftovers, rotting all over the place. Mold blooms on dishes like some grotesque garden. Three baskets of potpourri, a pathetic attempt to disguise the stench. “My God,” Gina breathes. Empty cabinets: every dish dirty. Something, perhaps potato salad, cemented on a glass bowl. Another something congealed on a serving platter. I tilt the platter to the left and the glob slides revealing a pretty picnic scene; little pink bunnies wearing dresses. Ham. “Easter dinner?” “Easter was... two months ago...” Gina counts on her fingers. A jellybean, fossilized on a cupcake, its frosting turned

plaster. The dishwasher, packed with more filth. Broken. Gina dry heaves. "What's wrong with these people?" I'm getting angry; this is far worse than the toilet job.

We need to start somewhere. I pick up a pot, murky water sloshes; "I'm scared to dump this..." "Who cares about her drains?" Gina hisses, poised with a pan of sludge. We hold our pots over the sink, oil glistens on the top. We look at each other then retreat. Retreat. We think. We take all the dishes. Behind the shed. The garden hose. Gina obliterates the culinary carnage. Jellybeans fly. Chunks of god-knows-what clings to the grass. We eye their swimming pool.

Relay race to get dishes stacked back in cabinets. Wipe down the counter tops. Lemony fresh victory. Underneath it all, such as beautiful kitchen space.

Clunker rumbles. Putrid egg water and ham clinging to our clothes. Windows down. We wave at the suburbanites from the cockroach. A triumphant stench cloud trailing behind. Off to blow some money at the DQ. Hamburgers, fries, Oreo Blizzard. You're welcome.



Julie Murdock has had a long career creating business-to-business technology content. She recently started publishing fiction. By day, she covers topics like asset lifecycle management and revenue optimization. By night, like a literary Catwoman, she turns to something edgier: writing fiction stories for the intrigue and challenge they present. Her debut story was published in *Symphonies of Imagination* and another story is scheduled to appear in an upcoming issue of *Synkroniciti*. Julie makes her home in Michigan and Florida, USA. Learn more about her at <https://www.juliemurdoc>.

Born to Be Wild

“I’m not wearing those.”

“These are very comfortable and sturdy shoes,” Ada replied. “I need you to be safe.”

Nell crossed her arms. “They’re ugly. I don’t like them.”

Why did everything have to be a battle? They were always late due to these little standoffs. Ada glanced at the clock. The car was already running.

“We’ve got to get going. Just wear the shoes for now,” she said firmly.

“I won’t wear those things. They look like old-lady shoes.”

Ada threw up her hands. “Mom! If you don’t qualify as an old lady, who does?”

As soon as she said it, she knew she’d regret it. Nell drew herself up to her full 4’6” height and glared at her daughter through milky, 102-year-old eyes.

“Why don’t you wear them, then? As far as anyone is concerned, you’re an old lady now too.” She paused to swallow and take a breath, but she held up one bony finger. She wasn’t finished. “If you’ve given up, that’s your business. But I’m not showing up to my great-granddaughter’s wedding like that. I want my dress shoes.”

Ada's cheeks went hot. Nell was going to be in a wheelchair most of the evening, covered with a lap blanket. Did it really matter what her gosh-darn shoes looked like?

But she sighed and felt her anger slide away. She even had to hide a little smirk and admit, if only to herself, that she hoped she was this feisty in another 20 years—if she was even still around. She went to fetch the Mary Janes from Nell's closet, carefully wrapped in tattered tissue paper inside their original box. They were decades old, with pointy toes and rhinestones across the strap. At least they were relatively flat, with a low, chunky heel, because Mom was almost certainly going to want to dance at the reception.



Scott MacLeod is a father of two who writes in Central Florida. His work has appeared recently in *10 by 10 Flash Fiction Stories*, *The Twin Bill*, *The Yard: Crime Blog*, *RMag*, *Shotgun Honey*, *The Under Review*, *Punk Noir*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Trash Cat Lit*, *Sum Flux*, *Micromance*, *Free Flash Fiction*, *Westwords*, *BULL*, *Flash Fiction North*, *Microzine*, *Dead Mule*, *Close to the Bone*, *Roi Faineant*, *Urban Pigs*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Wrong Turn Lit*, *Rabbit's Foot*, *JAKE*, *Underbelly Press*, *Bristol Noir*, *Havok*, *Witcraft*, *NFFD Write-In*, *Coffin Bell*, *Frontier Tales*, *Yellow Mama*, *Short-story.me* and *Gumshoe*, with more forthcoming. His “Son of Ugly” weekly flash newsletter is on Substack at <https://scottmacleod1.substack.com>, on Instagram @scottmacleod478, and on @ScottMacLe59594 and at <http://www.facebook.com/scott.Macleod.334>

Amicable

The ex was calling. He wanted a ride to their daughter’s chorus concert. They had been through this many times. She generally parried his insistence on various “family outings” with her own insistence that he was not her family. Not anymore. She had paid good money for that privilege. On the other hand, it did not bother her to cooperate from time to time on joint parenting activities. Like this recital. Their daughter preferred they sit together. No, this was not a case of the girl’s wish that they get back together or any confusion that might happen. Just because Lee and Grant shared a signing table at Appomattox nobody thought they were going out for hot wings and karaoke later that night. For whatever reason it seemed to appeal to their daughter’s sense of calm and order that she didn’t need to scan the audience for two separate outposts while she warbled.

She picked up the ex in plenty of time for the show. They chatted amiably; there was no active hostility or live conflict. Really there was nothing between them at all, positive or negative, other than certain ongoing legal obligations, not crippling at this phase, so as naturally good-natured people there was no reason not to converse. The only real negative for her is that invariably he would half-

heartedly probe for more of her money like an aging prospector slowly swinging his axe to try to dislodge just a bit more gold dust. Nothing she couldn't ignore.

Their talk was interrupted by the trilling of her phone, broadcast through her dashboard display, the finest that Bavarian engineering could produce. The big screen lit up with the name of the caller as designated in her digital contacts list: "Loser".

Her main thought at the moment was relief that she had not opted for the moniker that she originally picked for him when she had first edited her contacts to replace his Christian name. Her first thought had been to impugn his manhood. The third rail of Y chromosome disparagement. But ultimately, she decided against it. Back then when he still called a lot, she did not want to be in a work meeting, or God Forbid, with her daughter, and have her phone light up with a profanity. Not that the big "L" was a compliment. But it was empirically true. And he knew it. Maybe that made it worse.

He registered the rumble in his back pocket just after her onboard screen illuminated. It dawned on him that he had redialed accidentally his most recent call, the one to her, his ex, asking for this ride.

He then really focused on the glowing console for the first time.

The rest of the drive was much quieter.



Colson Brooks is an aspiring writer from Kentucky currently living in Bogota, Colombia.

Frozen Tears

Michael heaved in and out, panting with his hands resting on his knees. “You already done this soon?” Jordan called out.

“Of course not,” Michael responded with a cunning smirk. His hands burning, he turned his back toward Jordan, leaned down, cupped a handful of snow, and whipped around pelting Jordan with the snowball.

“I thought we were taking a break!” Jordan yelled as he refilled his own ammunition and began chasing Michael through the yard. The two kept on like this for some time; taking turns chasing the other in circles. Passersby muttered amongst themselves, astonished and surprised to see two old men humiliating themselves in the public by acting like drunk youths.

Michael’s daughter Roseanne watched her father from the doorway, crying. She could not make sense of the situation. Many of Michael’s friends had come to the house to be with Michael, mourn with him the death of his wife, and accompany him to the funeral that afternoon. Yet, when Michael awoke that morning, he spoke solely of the beauty of the fresh snow, then his plans to ambush his childhood friend Jordan with snowballs at his arrival. Roseanne walked outside, dodged an ill-aimed snowball, and said with a somber voice, “Dad, we really should be going you know.”

“Yes, we should be,” Michael responded. He dusted off his hands, complimented Jordan on a worthy battle, then put on his coat and departed for the funeral.

The funeral really was a beautiful affair. Friends and family, from now and long ago, celebrated the wife’s life with stories, songs, tears, laughs, and hugs. Michael treasured the ability and opportunity to remember the precious moments of his wife’s life and all of her quirks that made him love her. He hugged more

people that day than he had in the past several years, and he savored the warmth of each hug on such a cold day.

As they walked home from the funeral, Michael asked Roseanne if she had noticed the trees. “I think they look splendid today, don’t you?” he said, “I’m always so amazed at the transformation that comes over a barren tree when it delights itself in the presence of the snow. The winter trees seem dead and worthless, but on a day like today, I simply adore them.”

Roseanne was not impressed by the trees. Her sadness overshadowed them. As they approached their house, she told her dad that by his age she thought he would have learned better how to grieve and not run from and deny his emotions. “Maybe I have learned,” was his response. Then he opened the front door and said, “after you, Roseanne.”

They ate dinner quietly. Somberness filled the room as the cold air from outside sought to snuff out the warmth of the soup they were eating. That night, Michael lay in bed weeping, for the sorrow of death, and for the beauty of life.



Marie Anderson is a Chicago area married mother of three millennials. Her stories have appeared in dozens of publications, including *Epic Echoes*, *MetaStellar*, *Third Wednesday*, *The Mersey Review* and *Fiction on the Web*. Since 2009 she has led and learned from a writing critique group at a public library in La Grange, IL

A Lucky Boy

Is that an emergency siren blasting me awake?

I stumble up the basement steps. It's a screaming smoke alarm that's killing my ears. I push open the door and step into the kitchen. A hot whoosh tears into me. A fireball surrounds me. Heat rips my breaths. My nose burns like I'm burping carbonated pop through it. I run through fire. It feels like my eyeballs are melting, my teeth exploding. Everything is yellow.

Later, I stand in a tank, screaming, while saltwater sprays loose my dead, burned skin. I'm fed for five months by a tube that goes through my nose to my stomach. I have dozens of operations, including five where surgeons pull and turn outward the inside of my lip, turning my lips into bloated sausage. My lips that once kissed the prettiest girl in my eighth-grade class and cursed Dad when he left me for a better family, leaving behind drinks-too-much Mom and his leather jacket and pants which fit me because I'm tall as him. I take so much medication that my hearing is damaged. One ear is mostly gone. My eyebrows and hair are gone. My face is blotchy red and yellow-white. My face skin is thick, fibrous, and shiny. My left hand is plastic. No one but the doctors and Gramma see the monster me. I wrap gauze like a mummy around my face when Mrs. Templeton homeschools me and Miss Karen therapy-talks me. They're both young and cute and I don't wanna freak them.

The night I burned I'd been out with the guys celebrating eighth grade graduation. I was wearing Dad's leather jacket and pants. Mom thought I was

spending the night with my best friend, but we'd had a fight over a girl, him and me, and I'd come home full of vodka and stumbled into the basement to avoid Mom who I could hear snoring upstairs. I fell asleep on the basement couch wearing all that leather. So later, when Mom poured gasoline on the floors and tossed in her lit cigarette, I didn't burn to death like she did. Lucky I was wearing the leather jacket and leather pants that night, the doctors told me and Gramma. That saved me. I write Dad a letter because Gramma and me don't know his email or phone number and he lives we're not sure exactly, but Gramma has a Post Office Box address for him five states away.

Lucky I was wearing your leather jacket and leather pants that night, I tell him. That saved me. I don't look much like you anymore, but I still got your height. Hope you doing well.

Weeks later, the letter is returned. On the envelope under the P.O. Box address are black words on a yellow sticker: Return to Sender. Undeliverable. No Forwarding Address.



Derek McMillan is a writer in Durrington in the UK. His editor is his wife, Angela. He has written for print and online publications in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada. His latest book is the audio-book *Flash Fiction* which is available on eBay.

The Evil Empire

It started in a dream. I dreamt that I had downloaded a trending game "Evil Empire". It had already spawned two lookalikes, "Vile Empire" and the satirical "Live Empire". For good measure, I downloaded them too.

When I woke up I found that my phone had downloaded "Evil Empire" all by itself. These smartphones really are smart. Then I tried to turn to other apps. It wouldn't let me. I swiped up, down and sideways to no avail.

Then I tried to reset the phone. It had disabled that too. I could not switch it off and I couldn't turn the volume down although the music was really annoying.

I turned on the radio. Radio Four reported,

"Britain has been the victim of an unprecedented cyber attack. It is reported that mobile phones have been incapacitated by a video game called..."

And there it stopped and the "Evil Empire" music started to play. I tried to turn the radio off. It wouldn't turn off. So I tried another station. One or two were still working normally for a few minutes before the accursed music started up. I unplugged the radio.

The same was true of the TV. The game seemed to be playing with itself so to speak and the screen switched between levels and screens giving the score and all the time the hideous music. It must have been designed to addle the mind.

I persuaded the family to deposit their mobile phones in our bedroom. It takes a hammer and chisel to remove the battery so I decided to let it run down. The music was still audible but that could have been from old Frank next door who had told me his phone had done the same as mine. It was the first time I had talked

to old Frank in many years.

Around the kitchen table, we were all at a loose end and had to engage in what the old timers called "polite conversation". It was a strain I can tell you. The children did not know what to do with their hands when there were no phones to play with.

I had to get my news from an old-fashioned newspaper. It was like going back to the 1950s except in the 1950s we had the Light Programme.

It took a few weeks but in the end, we adjusted. We started talking to people instead of texting them. We buried the smart phones in the garden as did all our neighbours.

The "Evil Empire" cyberattack had actually made the world a better place.



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

The Reborn Baby Doll

Her new sister, it isn't, but her mother isn't empty-handed. She has selected the model featuring the optional beating heart and carried that baby into the house just before her father slams the door behind them. *Bernadine*, she hears her mother whispering, *my Bernadine*. "For therapy," her mother tells her. "Your mother needs it," talking as if someone else lives in the house.

For weeks, her mother cares for Bernardine. Each night, when the crib in the spare room is occupied, the baby monitor watches and listens, but the girl never hears it activate.

One morning, three months gone by, her mother doesn't carry that baby into the kitchen. "That's that," her father says. Her mother smiles, but the girl feels lonely when she sees that the crib is gone.

The next day, when her mother returns to work three times a week and the house is empty except for the new babysitter, the girl searches for Bernardine while the babysitter talks on her phone. It takes a chair moved quietly to find her behind the winter comforter rolled tightly on the guestroom closet shelf.

The babysitter is happy to see her cuddling Bernardine. "That's a cute baby," she says. The girl smiles, feeling Bernardine's heart sound its simple dependence against her body. "Have fun," the babysitter says, and goes back to her phone.

Each time the girl carefully replaces Bernardine behind the comforter, she chooses one of her dolls to pack away like clothes she has outgrown. Her father, when he notices, says, "You're getting to be such a big girl so fast."

Three weeks, it takes, for all of the girl's dolls and her father to vanish. That night, the girl sleeps alone, excited by her plan to leave Bernardine on her bed tomorrow when the babysitter leaves and her mother returns.

That afternoon, when the girl pulls Bernardine close, she feels no pulse, even when she presses her ear on the narrow chest. Wailing, she places her fingers upon her wrist, listening to her terrible song.



Bill Merkle's work has appeared in numerous journals and in *Best Microfiction 2021*, and has been nominated for *Best Small Fictions*. He was short-listed for the Bath Novella-in-Flash Award and the Fractured Lit Chapbook Prize, and long-listed for the Wigleaf Top 50. He lives in New Jersey. Find him at billmerkle.com and [@bmerklee.bsky.social](https://www.instagram.com/bmerklee).

White Paper Gown

Outside, the day is an oven. That doesn't deter the handful of protestors across the street. They're quiet, but their signs scream alternatives. We've already considered them. But at eighteen, neither of us makes much money, and Allie's dad is perfectly capable of killing us both.

Inside, the room is a washed-out Polaroid, the air clean as crisp linen. My sweaty arms cool quickly, making the hairs feel brittle. I pay at the window and Allie fills out forms on a clipboard. Every bill in my wallet feels like sandpaper. She's called in minutes later. I take Allie's hand and she squeezes hard, like she wants me to stay with her. I watch the double doors swing closed.

Everyone in the waiting room is sitting on the same edge. I feel their eyes on me; I'm the only male in here. I pretend to read a magazine. Three cups of water fail to wash the metallic taste from my mouth.

This could be a hospital, a courtroom, a church — places we go to reset. Places where some make peace with their god.

They bring Allie out in a wheelchair, assure me it's just protocol.

The gown was white she says. White paper.

Allie needs time before going home to act like nothing happened. We drive to my house saying nothing. My parents won't suspect anything; they think she's a quiet girl anyway. I turn on the TV and we sink into the sofa. Mom brings us lemonade. I take Allie's hand, hold it like a baby's, like she might break. She takes it back.



Marie Cloutier (she/her) is a writer and poet. Her work has appeared in *Scribes Micro*, *Corvus Review*, *10x10 Flash Fiction* and elsewhere. She is at work on a memoir. Her website is www.mariecloutier.com.

Closing Up

I blow on the cocoa even though it's not hot anymore. My boss lets me relax a little after my shift, lets me sit a minute or two more before I go out in the cold, before I have to tell my girl. It's the least he can do I know. I stare at the filmy brown drink, cold, no marshmallows. A little grit clings to the sides of the thick-walled mug. The diner is quiet, blue booths empty, blue plastic cushions freshly wiped, tables cleared. I exhale and think about how I'll tell her, how we'll manage to have a Christmas with no money, no job.

I'd been working late again, saving extra tips to put something nice under the tree, but by the end of the day I get so tired. Working on autopilot the tired seeps into me until I can't imagine its absence, until I'm soaked through with it. Pick up the dirty plates, sweep up the crumbs, try not to hit their feet with the broom. Smile. As soon as I clean up one mess they make another and it's worse than with kids because I can't say anything, I have to smile. So I missed some signal, didn't catch the right snippet of conversation and when I said something it was the wrong thing.

Now I sit with the dregs of this cocoa and feel the boss behind me, hands on hips, waiting. He tried to be nice about it, I should try to appreciate that, but all I can think of is Natasha's face and our plans, ruined. I cross my feet under the chair. I look down. I wasn't surprised when he told me not to come back.