

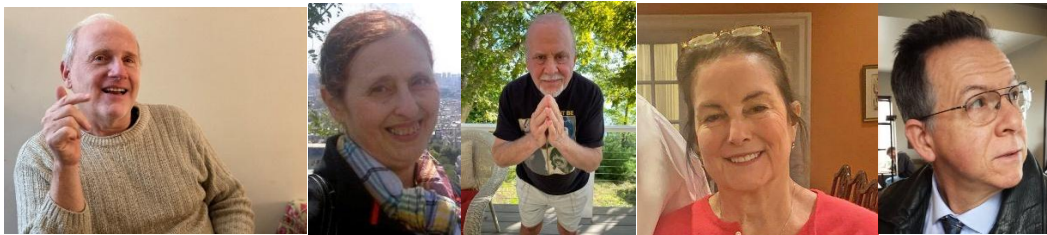


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# 10 BY 10

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FLASH FICTION STORIES



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Welcome to Issue #33. Happy Halloween. Enjoy this issue.

*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 four-time Pushcart Prize poetry nominee. His story “Chili Man” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Sesling’s poetry books are *King of the Jungle*, *Fire Tongue*, *The Lynching of Leo Frank*, *War Zones* and *Simple Game and Ghosts of Fenway*, *Baseball Poems*. His poetry chapbooks are *Across Stones of Bad Dreams* and *Love Poems From Hell*. Sesling’s volume of flash fiction is *Secret Behind the Gate*, and his flash chapbook is *Wheels*. Sesling and Paul Beckman have also published a book of flash fiction titled *40 Stories*. Sesling lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



**James B. Nicola's** nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice Magazine Award*. Recent nonfiction can be found on-line at *About Place*, *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*, *Unlikely Stories* and *Lowestoft Chronicle*; fiction, at *Neither Fish Nor Foul*, *The GroundUp*, and *Sine Qua Non*. The latest of his eight full-length poetry collections (2014-23) are *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense*, *Turns & Twists*, and *Natural Tendencies*. A graduate of Yale, he has received a Dana Literary Award and two *Willow Review* awards, *Storyteller's* People's Choice award, a Best of Net and a Rhysling Award nomination, and eleven Pushcart nominations — for which he feels both stunned and grateful.

### Party Games

When you play a practical joke that doesn't hurt or embarrass anyone irreparably, that is indeed a practical joke and you can call yourself a jokester—or joker—or even a Jester, which, back in the day, comported with kings!

But when you play a practical joke that compels someone who has been, say, blindfolded to do something they would not do normally—and certainly not in front of the rest of the kids at the party....

Well, the kid who let you blindfold them trusted you, and their trust was misplaced. So what you are is not a joker or jokester at all; what you are is untrustworthy, a whole other vat of worms, and they probably shouldn't keep you as a friend.

I know of an incident like this. I won't tell you what the joke was, and I won't tell you if I was at the party or just heard about it the next day, or whether I was the jokester, the rube, or just someone there who saw it all. Who was who and what was done is not the point, after all. Why extend the evil with its details? I am sure you get the idea. Right?

But the pranked-upon didn't say a word for the rest of that night or that weekend, while the one who set up the prank barely shut up, and for the rest of the year the two did not talk to each other, not a single word, nor even look at each other, as I recall. And previously they were friendly if not actually friends.

It was in high school, and we all had plenty of classes together, and I saw and learned.

So in college, at a party where abuse was about to be enacted as fun, I spoke up.

And there was no abuse and, because we all trusted each other, even more fun.

And some of us are still friends to this day.



**Nina Rubinstein Alonso's** work appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *New Boston Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, *Bluepepper*, etc. *This Body*, was published by David Godine, *Riot Wake* by Cervena Brava Press, *Distractions En Route* by Ibbetson Street, *Travels With Fernando* and *Balancing On One Leg* by Wilderness House and *The Ones I Could Tell Anything* by Ibbetson Street..

### **Subway to Harvard Square**

The train doors slide open at Park Street and a bunch of kids who've been elbowing each other grab one boy's arms and hang him over the edge. The station guard notices, starts striding toward them, pistol on his right hip, billy club on his left, the boys get the message, shuffle onto the platform and scatter. The doors clang shut, the train edges out of the tunnel onto the bridge over the Charles River, night water blistered with a scatter of lights, into the next tunnel.

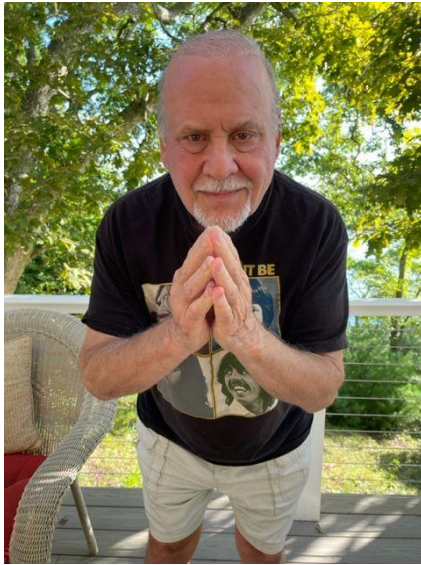
Across the aisle Dina notices a woman with watery blue eyes, her gaze a map of vagueness, her hand searching every frayed pocket of her gray raincoat. She keeps muttering "Lost my keys, left on the kitchen table, maybe dropped at the store, but it's closed now, heard my cat crying, poor thing, can't get in, landlady somewhere playing cards, have to go to the police station."

When Dina was small a policeman they called Big Arthur lived in the upstairs apartment with his wife Ingrid. He had a gun, a billy club, thick-soled shoes and he'd ask, "How're you today, dearie?" Dina would grip her mother's hand, too shy to talk to this enormous man. He'd smile, keep reading his paper, smoking his pipe. His son Young Arthur's right leg was heavily braced from the war.

The lost-key woman keeps talking, “When I had fever, my daughter called police for help, I heard them knock and hollered, “Get outta here,” delirious, but my daughter’s a nurse, let them in. Took me in an ambulance, but I hate doctors and hospitals, though my daughter says they saved me. Which station is this?” Jumps up, reads the sign, sits down again. “Kendall. I want Central.”

At least she knows where she’s going as Dina’s not in a helpful mood. It’s late, she’s tired, her feet ache from hours teaching ballet, adjusting pointe shoes, checking costumes, assisting rehearsals. Not sure what’s in the fridge for supper, maybe cheese, a few crackers. Lonely in that attic flat since her cat died.

“Central,” the woman says, gets up, makes her way out the door. No one says anything, though they’ve heard as much as Dina has. A girl with frizzy blond hair and narrow dark eyes takes the lost-key lady’s seat. Her tall boyfriend leans close, strokes her cheek, his hand cupping the side of her face with tenderness, like nothing else on this subway, all the way to Harvard Square.



**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 2012 and lives in Plymouth, MA, where he has happily completed *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.

### **Genius Discovered**

I should have been suspicious when I received the first email, from a group calling itself The Undiscovered Geniuses Book Club.

Truth was, I was so flattered by the club’s uncontainable excitement at finding an undiscovered novel like my first effort, “Bing-Bang I Saw The Whole Gang,” that I completely missed out that they were asking me for money.

As background, I should reveal I self-published “Bing-Bang...” to little notice and even less acclaim over 20 years ago. If anyone had discovered my genius through this particular novel, they had kept it a secret from me.

Till now, I guess.

Yes, in between words of praise and rank adulation lavished on “Bing-Bang...” by the curator of the Undiscovered Geniuses Book Club was a stern refusal to share my novel, this admitted literary masterpiece with their literature-

starved readers, until I pulled a small ‘tip’ from my wallet, enough for a coffee and doughnut, they explained, just to show my appreciation.

Right away they let me know their readers were selling at \$20 a piece.

Before I had a chance to decide on the number of tips it might take to lift my review statistics, all hell broke loose. Suddenly I was no longer an undiscovered writing genius but rather the Flavor Of The Month for half a dozen book clubs that were combing the millions of unheralded novels published each year for those that were truly notable and worth saving from obscurity.

Works of genius and literary excellence, such as “Lonely Are The Lonely.”

My second novel. No longer undiscovered, but now a requested feature for the Books of Gold Book Club.

To be distributed to its members just as soon as I determined whether I’m tipping for 20 or 40 readers.

Luckily for me, before I sent any tips or doughnuts, I happened to notice that many of the notes I received from hyper-excited book club curators had used similar language and, in two cases, the exact same language, to stroke my ego and blow proverbial smoke in my proverbial face.

Was it possible that separate book club curators in separate cities in separate states could have felt “elation to the skies” and “gobsmacked as if struck by the sharpest edge of genius” at the same time in reading my third novel, “What’s Yours Was Mine?”

Or was I trapped in an AI sales loop, as I came to realize? An Artificial Intelligence loop that will expand and never take no for an answer?

But then again, genius is so rarely recognized these days... And it’s only a \$20 tip.



**Andrea Marcusa's** writings have appeared in The Gettysburg Review, Moon City Review, Milk Candy Review, Ghost Parachute, Citron Review, and others. She's received recognition in a range of competitions, including Smokelong, Best Microfiction, Cleaver, and Southampton Review and is the author of the chapbook "What We Now Live With," (Bottlecap Press) She's a member of the faculty at The Writers Studio. For more information, visit: [andreamarcusa.com](http://andreamarcusa.com) or see her on Blue Sky: @andreamarcusa.bsky

## Scar

The pink strip runs along the side of my thigh between my hip and knee and has for decades. A badge I've proudly worn since a fall off the top of a high storage box at the beach, where I'd parked myself in my beach chair with a group of my preteen pals. As I tipped back the chair to even out the beams of sun tanning my legs, I lost my balance and teetered, until crashing to the ground, the sharp corner of the metal armrest dragging along my thigh in slow motion, ripping apart the skin like a snowplow.

The wound oozed and bled for days under the long white bandage and with it came the questions—followed by my eager retelling of the accident, turning me from wallflower to hero. I kept that scar for a month, picking at it and making it bleed so it would scab over again, stringing out the wound and story until summer's end when it was finally covered by trousers. I didn't know the stripe of scar, now white, would last a lifetime.

How I loved and nurtured that scar. How it set me apart.

How it still makes me brave.



**Phil Temples** resides in Watertown, Massachusetts. He's had five mystery-thriller novels, a novella, and two short story anthologies published in addition to over 170 short stories online. Phil is a member of New England Science Fiction Association, the Mystery Writers of America, O'Hara's Prose Writers and the Bagel Bards. You can learn more about him at <https://temples.com>.

### **Humble Beginnings**

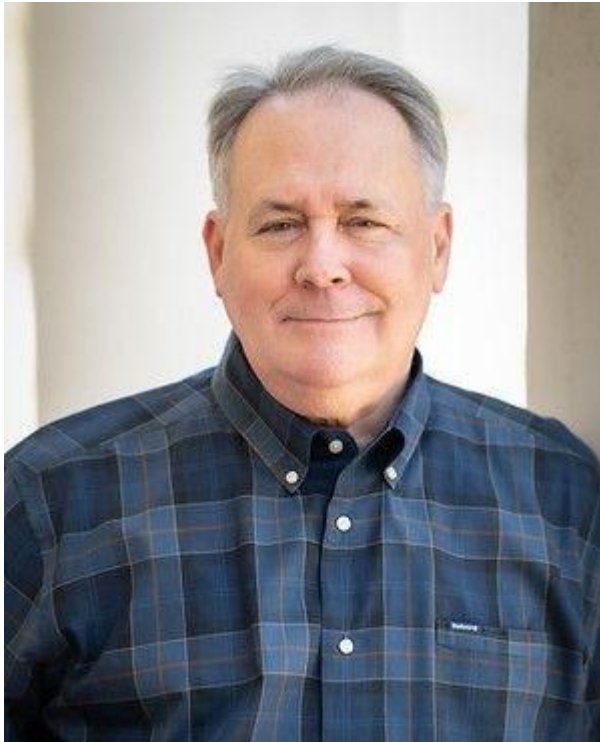
As a graduate student in Harvard University's Archaeology program, my department chair was kind enough to write on my behalf a letter of recommendation to participate in a restoration project at the site of the old canals along the West Branch Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. Now, I always fancied working at digs at exotic locales, like the Hellenistic and Roman ruins in Aphrodisias, Turkey; or the wonders of Jerash in Jordan. I would even have been ecstatic to receive an assignment at one of the Roman digs near the original City of London Wall. But alas—I suppose the careers of even the most accomplished archaeologists must start with more humble beginnings!

The West Branch Canal walls still stand near Muncy, while other canal and lock remnants are preserved near Lock Haven. The lock tender's house has been restored and there are plans to turn it into some sort of gift shop. I'm told this was supposed to become a pristine park and nature trail encompassing over eleven acres.

Sometimes, however, the best-laid plans of mice, men, and selectmen do not always come to pass. You see—I was fated to make a seminal discovery on that sunny, spring morning that would shock and excite the archaeological world. My small dig in one corner of the canal lock site revealed undisputed evidence of an ancient Viking settlement constructed along the Susquehanna

River dating back to the late 8th century—almost two centuries prior to when the Norse were thought to have arrived in North America.

Work on the park and nature trail has been suspended, of course. Plans to build a gift shop on the premises have also been canceled. And, of course, there's little doubt I'll be earning my Ph.D. Pennsylvania doesn't seem like such a bad place to work, after all.



**Niles Reddick** is author of a novel, four short fiction collections, and two novellas. His work has appeared in over five hundred publications including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *New Reader Magazine*, *Cheap Pop*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Citron Review*, *Hong Kong Review*, and *Vestal Review*.

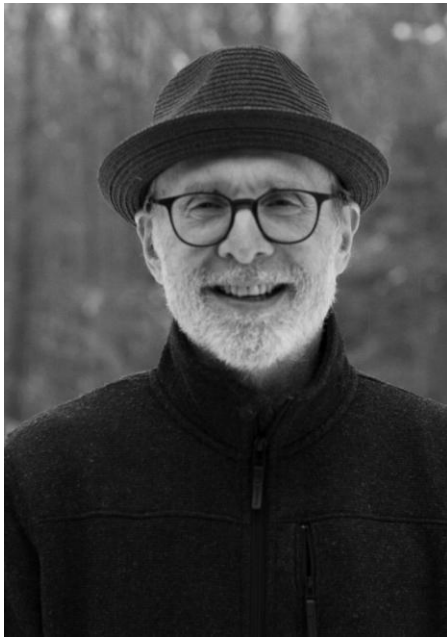
### **Follow the Yellow Brick Road**

I stood by the cologne counter waiting for my wife who'd gone to the restroom and reduced my breaths to shallow ones because of noxious fumes from expensive samples that gave me a headache. A guy rounded the corner and took a whiff from an amber bottle, and the salesperson smiled, her red lipstick glistening under the fluorescent lights, her glued eyelashes flapping, and her matching acrylic nails tapping the glass counter. She compared colognes and prices for him while the linebacker waited for the right signal to purchase. She told him the brand was woodsy, earthy. I'd never smelled cologne in the woods.

He was a modern-day Goliath, wore a T-shirt with the local university's logo, stood about six feet six inches, and probably weighed over three hundred pounds. I must've seemed like a munchkin right out of the 1930's classic to him. If it hadn't been for my mom, making me stand straight and balance a book on my head while wearing corrective shoes and braces to remedy my pigeon-toed feet, I probably wouldn't have made it to five feet seven.

I asked him about football and his goals, and we took a selfie for me to send to my adult children, fans of the team who couldn't go to games because they needed a small loan to buy season tickets. He wanted to go pro, maybe finish

the degree. I didn't tell him there wasn't a wizard at the end of the yellow brick road, but I did tell him in my best munchkin voice dredged up from the middle school play to find the courage to follow his heart and finish the degree.



**JeffF Friedman's** eleventh book, *Broken Signals* was published by Bamboo Dart Press in 2024. Friedman's poems and microfictions have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *Fiction International*, *Dreaming Awake: New Contemporary Prose Poetry from the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Flash Fiction Funny*, *Wigleaf*, *100-word Story*, *Plume*, *Contemporary Surrealist and Magical Realist Anthology*, *Cast-Iron Aeroplanes That Can Actually Fly: Commentaries from 80 American Poets on their Prose Poetry*, *New England Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Rattle*, *Antioch Review*, *Best Microfiction 2021 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025*, and *The New Republic*. He has received an NEA Literature Translation Fellowship and numerous other awards

### **Long Yawn**

When I told her a story about my family, she yawned on the couch, and her blue eyes seemed distracted. We were sitting across from each other and had been a couple for about a year. She went to get a glass of water. When she came back, I began to tell her a second story about my family, and now she let out a series of long yawns. "Your family is really crazy," she said. I was surprised by her comment, even though there was some truth to what she said. Now I went to get a glass of water and came back to my chair. When I started another story, she not only yawned, she closed her eyes. I could hear the susurrus of her voice whispering, but couldn't grasp her words. She looked beautiful lying there, one foot draped over the edge. Was she really about to fall asleep while I was trying to talk to her or she was just pretending—to make a point—and what would that

point be? “Am I boring you?” I asked. At first, she didn’t answer. Then she smiled the way she smiles when she eats peaches out of the can. “Nothing you can do about your family, except tell another story,” she said and fell asleep.



**Emily Keverne** is a writer from the UK. She was shortlisted for the Charles Causley International Poetry Competition 2019, and her work has appeared in *Café Aphra*, *Backchannels Literary Journal*, *Anansi Archives* and *Quail Bell Magazine*.

### **Sunset Curiosity**

Something's burning. Pepper knows it too; I can tell by the great gusting sniffs she takes, the meaty bellows of her ribs swelling against my knees. Dependable as the tides. She's the calmest horse at the stables, we all think so. Crows in a screaming coil ascend from a neighbouring field. Anyway, it's a chimney's clean coal and wood smell. Not the suspicious mongrel stink of bonfire smoke.

Autumn is barely here, the green leaves only beginning to give it up for bronze. The towering stone hedgerows still brim with blackberry-laden brambles, and shrubs with their bursts of red currants and bilberries. At least, I guess they're bilberries. I lean over slightly in the saddle, squinting at the deeply indigo baubles. What's the difference between a blueberry and a bilberry? Or are each of these fit-to-burst morsels, in fact, deadly nightshade?

Ahead, where the lane subtly curves to the left, a woman appears. She reminds me of a bunny popping abruptly out of a burrow. She wears a white loose-flowing skirt, with flappy beach sandals, and a rigid, horrified face. Nothing about her seems equipped for the country. Pepper rolls steadily onward, her languid chestnut head bobbing. But I shift my weight, gently pulling the reins until she halts.

"You've got room to go 'round," I call, but this is ignored.

Instead, the woman sways on the spot, her movement reminiscent of a partially rotten wooden fencepost in a strong breeze. She is dreadfully pale, perhaps, though there's every chance that she always looks that way. I don't know her. The next second, with a flash of her skirt and a great slapping of sandals, she's running back the way she came.

"Hey now," I soothe the horse. Honestly. They're exactly like massive rabbits when you get right down to it.

Easing forwards again, I decide the woman must be a recluse. Possibly she is concerned over the etiquette involved in passing a rider and horse. For example, is she supposed to greet me first, or my noble steed? Or perhaps she is a tourist from an excessively urban city who worries that I am mounted police come to arrest her for trespassing on the public footpath? Or perhaps she's high and believes she's just met a centaur.

The lane broadens around the bend and then continues straight for several metres. The woman has quite vanished, but soon enough I hear her loudly vomiting as we amble past a paddock's metal gate. Someone will not be pleased to find that.

Pepper's tail flicks incessantly at her entourage of hungry horseflies, the little pests seeking a final feed before the day's end. The sun dips low. It's gone six and the world is washed in transient gold. We journey valiantly for our respective snacks of hay and shortbread biscuits. I hadn't meant to ride this long.

They are bilberries, I decide, though they've turned all dark in the changing light.



**Fatimah Akanbi** writes fiction and poetry. She has been writing since she was five, and is currently pursuing a degree in Information Technology at the University of Ilorin. Her works have appeared or are forthcoming on *Sudden Flash*, *Star\*Line*, *The Five-Two* & *Academy of the Heart and Mind*.

### Ellipsis

My loose canine stings as I roll the tip of my tongue over it. I push the tooth harder, enduring the brief pang of severance that comes before it drops to the side of my mouth. I spit it into my hand and shove it in my right pocket. It bounces inside when I jump onto the gritty pavement.

Tugging the strap of my bag, I squint at the road. *There*, I grin, one canine short, and set off to skip jollily across the asphalt. Mummy never lets me cross the road alone, but I know I'm not in any danger here. There's a big scary pothole in this part of the road that makes speeding drivers gulp and hit the brakes, so nothing here could be moving fast enough to run me over. She doesn't need to worry.

The big pothole was the reason this place became known as Grey Road. The road isn't grey any more—hasn't been since 2010—but somehow, the name managed to stick. There was an accident that year; an old timber wagon and a big oil tanker. The road burst out in flames, burning into the thick concoction of diesel, charcoal and ash that earned it its name. That was four years before I was born, yes, but I remember it all. The acrid night air and the sooty footprints and every cinder on the smouldering asphalt... all of it.

I rub my nose and step away from the road. By the time I put my feet on the stone stair, my slack lace socks have begun to come off again. With a snort, I hitch them up for the umpteenth time today. They no longer make these things

like they used to. The *lacies* were much more elastic in the early 2000s—they'd fit perfectly for years. Nowadays, if you get them to live through a month, you're lucky.

I climb awkwardly up the stairs, tugging the strap of my bag with my canine going thud-thud in my pocket. Teeth have calcium, and so does marble. These stairs used to be coated with marble once, but it dissolved in a vicious acid rain and washed away years ago. I pull my tooth out, set it gently in a corner with the others and wonder. If I get enough teeth, can I put the marble back?



Living in Australia, **Leonie Gregory** is an independent photographer and fiction writer who captures personal experiences and explores themes that reach beyond the ordinary. Some of her tales thread their way through the crowd and find publishers who care, while others search for the right audience. Her short stories have appeared in journals including *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *All Your Stories Magazine*, and others, while her microfiction has been featured in *50-Word Stories*, *101 Words*, *Dribble Drabble Review*, among others.

### **Resurrection**

The rain brought by Jasper, Australia's wettest cyclone, poured down like something out of a biblical plague. In days, the Daintree drowned, landslides shredded its 180-million-year-old rainforest, exposing soils locked away for millennia. When sunlight touched them, something ancient awakened. Spores germinated, fungi spread, seeds cracked. Roots revived, and ghostlike trees grew lush and blossomed. Pollinators swarmed...

Jasper cracked the seal on just one of the mysteries buried deep in the rainforest – itself older than dinosaurs, yet still alive, breathing, watching, seducing, messing with your sanity. Ben and Jessie weren't the first to fall for it. What, just a bit of fun, right? Off to wild places, flirting with danger, always sure they'd be fine.

That day felt no different. Their mud-splattered four-wheel drive crawled along a remote track until it stalled. Then the winch cable, strained to its limit, snapped.

"Didn't we pass a house or something?" Ben said. "Maybe help."

"Or trouble." Jessie shrugged.

After hours of bushwalking, the jungle thinned, and the house materialised. Sitting in the clearing, half-swallowed by grass, wild and dense, twitching in the wind. Snakes. Ticks. Crazy ants. Bet that grass's crawling. Turn back? Nah, too

late. The couple sprinted through the grass, barely touching earth, not slowing until the veranda groaned beneath their weight. The house was abandoned. Inside, it reeked of mould. Still, the rusty wood-burning stove worked – and they stayed the night.

Jessie blinked into the half-light, yawned. And froze. Fungi – hundreds, maybe thousands – had erupted from every crack in the floorboards. Knobbly, dark, slender, paled – they crawled over one another, caps pressed, stems tangled, glistening, pushing, writhing, bending, snapping. The stench was thick. Flies drifted lazily through the air. Along the walls, red fleshy growths bloomed, gaping like hungry mouths.

A shift, barely perceptible, made Jessie glance up. Through the window slid a green snake. It coiled around Ben's legs and yanked him towards the opening.

"Snake!" Jessie cried, lunging.

Ben's eyes snapped open. He screamed, thrashing wildly. But it wasn't a snake. The thing was a liana, thorned, its barbs tearing into their skin. Jessie seized the knife and hacked down, severing the vine. From a crack in the wall, another tendril writhed out, fast and eager.

"Run!" Jessie shrieked.

They bolted. But stopped dead at the threshold. The grass, grown overnight, rose shoulder-high and swayed. Encircling the house, a green tide surged hungrily towards it. Above, thousands of butterflies whirled – frantic, dazzling – until, from nowhere, a shadow crashed in, snatched and shredded one. It was a dragonfly, only gigantic... Each wing spanned a full metre of iridescent menace. It saw them and lunged. They ducked inside; the door behind slammed like a trap.

"That thing nearly bit my head off!" A nervous laugh escaped Ben.

"Shh..." Jessie whispered. Knife in hand.

He followed her stare. Neither dared move.

The monstrous dragonfly loomed outside, framed by the shattered window. Its eyes of jade-blue fixed on them. Wings glinting, mandibles moving. Legs like wire, spiny, ready to snatch.