



***FLASHWORDS!***

New England Crime Bake™

**2017**





## ***FLASHWORDS!***

We challenged the folks attending the 16th annual New England Crime Bake to write a compelling crime story in 150 words or less, using at least ten of twenty title words from novels by our Guest of Honor, Lisa Gardner.

We received 43 official entries displaying a wide variety of styles and depths of talent and creativity.

The three winning stories were selected with great difficulty in blind judging. In no particular order, they are:

*“The Interview”*

*by Maurissa Guibord*

*“The Neighbors’ Daughter”*

*by Rachel Brown*

*“Dirty Bird”*

*by Ray Daniel*

Congratulations and thank you to all who participated with such enthusiasm. Enjoy!

**Title Words:** accident, alone, burn, club, crash, daughter, fear, gone, goodbye, hide, husband, killing, lie, love, neighbor, nothing, perfect, survivors, touch, victim.



# The Interview

*By Maurissa Guibord*

I'm just a neighbor. I fear there's nothing I can tell you.

The husband is gone? Goodness, that's news to me.

No, he didn't say goodbye. Never even said hello. He was a quiet sort. Kept to himself.

Her? She's nice enough. Reminds me of my own daughter. We talk about gardening sometimes.

Oh yes, I've noticed the bruises. She usually wears makeup to hide them.

No, I never saw him touch her.

I guess she has a lot of accidents.

Why would she lie?

This? Oh, I just dug this for a new flower bed.

I love roses, don't you? So beautiful, so delicate.

They can be victims of so many tragic endings. Frost, aphids, blight.

But with just a little help, they can be survivors.

Well, good luck with your investigation, Officer.

I'm sure he'll turn up sooner or later.

Perhaps in the spring.

# The Neighbors' Daughter

*By Rachel Brown*

Ethan hides in the hedge to stare at the new neighbors' daughter. He could watch her bouncing brown ponytail all day. Suddenly, she hurls a stone and a window crashes. He jumps. She's gutsy. The neighbors run out, but they're not mad like he expected. They hover, then coax her inside.

The next day she's alone on her patio, piling up clothes. Her hair is loose; it's perfect that way too. She lights a match and laughs as the heap burns. She sounds beautiful, like a mandolin.

Ethan moves a branch to see better, but it snaps. She wheels around, then advances. Close up, it's obvious she's older than thirteen, older than him.

She touches his wrist and he loves the tingle. "Spy boy," she says, smiling.

"Where's your mom and dad?" he asks.

"Gone." She pulls him onto her side. He can tell she's strong. "Goodbye them; hello you."

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## Dirty Bird

By Ray Daniel

Inspector Corbeau looked into the parakeet's eyes, moved to touch him. The bird skittered away on its perch, fearing the finger.

"He loved that bird," said Clara, Tony's neighbor and girlfriend.

*Young enough to be his daughter.*

Tony lay dead at the bottom of the staircase.

"Terrible accident," Corbeau said. "No survivors."

"He was alone when he fell."

"Still, no survivors."

The bird skittered back down the perch. Bit Corbeau's finger.

"Son of a bitch!" Corbeau said.

"Join the club. Crash is a mean little bastard."

"Crash?"

"Tony named him for the ballplayer."

Corbeau crouched next to the victim. Took a closer look. Found something.

"There's blood," he said. "On the ear. Something bit him, distracted him, and sent him down the staircase."

"You're not saying—"

"J'accuse!" Corbeau cried, pointing a bleeding finger at Crash.

The parakeet gazed at Corbeau, "You got me, copper."

## Pitched Perfect

*By Zachariah Johnson*

“Goodbye, my lovelies.”

I touch a button and 235 husbands, sons, wives, and daughters lie scattered over acres of Scottish heather. No survivors, all gone like first love in the morning...except my intended victim.

The plane ruptures, plummets burning to crash and jumble, bounce and disassemble; flinging the screaming few still alive higgledy-piggledy over the heads of two gawking neighbors out riding bikes.

They're the ones who see the crate thrown clear, catch in the branches of some famous village oak.

“It's a miracle!” these gormless yokels announce, parroted by newscasters throughout the island. Next thing, she's a celebrity, guest of the palace—untouchable, beyond killing.

Unlike me. For me, it's time to hide.

Because while her Highness might not know, both MI6—and my employer—are well aware of the true contents of the microchip embedded in the rump of her newest corgi, one the press dubs “Miracle.”

## Family Affair

*By Dale T. Phillips*

Marla was nervously watching the news, but also the bags of money. It was supposed to be a perfect heist, as so many times before: just Marla, her husband, and daughter Denise. A family affair. But Denny had to go and spill the beans to her ex-con, lowlife boyfriend Rafe. Now he sat drinking beer like it was nothing.

Marla shot him a poisonous look.

“What?”

She almost spat. “No killing. That’s our cardinal rule. You agreed.”

He shrugged. “It was an accident.”

Marla knew it was a lie. Because of him, they would have to say goodbye to this house and hide out for years. *Damn him.*

Denny came up behind Rafe and cooed. “You know I love you babe, right?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“But family is more important.” She brought the bat down on the back of his skull.

Marla smiled proudly at her daughter.

# The Lie

By Stacy Woodson

Our marriage was perfect, not like our friends'. We were the survivors.

Until now.

My husband touches my cheek. Wine from dinner lingers on his breath. "Happy birthday, Love."

Anger burns my insides. I need to confront him: about the whispered calls, the secret rendezvous... *with my best friend*. It's killing me. But fear takes over. Life with him is all I know. I'm not sure if I'm ready to be alone.

We walk over my daughter's softball gear in the driveway to the front door. And it hits me, again...

The lie.

He tossed our marriage aside like it was some accident. Like it was nothing.

*He broke our perfect life.*

I grab my daughter's bat and swing. Crash.

He gasps. He falls. And...he's gone.

The door opens. Neighbors cheer, "Surprise!" My best friend holds a cake.

*Oh god.*

*No affair.*

*A perfect surprise party.*

*What have I done?*

# The Show Must Go On

*By JM Taylor*

“Step right up, give it a hop! But no one can hide beneath the Big Top!”

Alone in the center ring, I control the action, manipulating the audience. They applaud spectacles, gasp at fearless flying trapeze artists. But the circus is as empty as cotton candy, thanks to those barking activists. The lions are silenced, the beloved elephants gone. Nevermore will a crash of rhinos stampede through the dust. We’re left with a mere carful of clowns, but even they fell victim to trigger warnings.

In blazing top coat and hat, I announce Little Miss Sweet-tart, juggling her five burning Indian clubs. Nothing suggests the straw beneath her feet is anything but a path to the gallery seats. No one anticipates the lightning flash that touches off the tinder. The flame leaps like an acrobat to the canvas tent wall. In seconds, I will have my sweet revenge.

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# **An Apology, Slipped Under a Door**

*By Mikel Strom*

To our new downstairs neighbors:

My ex-husband has sent something your way that should've gone to our daughter, so we wanted you to know before it arrives that it's nothing to fear. We understand seeing his name on mail can be upsetting, but please be assured that this was an innocent mistake. The package was picked up before anyone realized he didn't have our new address. He's very embarrassed about this, and I can assure you he's not alone! While he hasn't told us exactly what's inside (it's for her birthday, and he loves surprising her), he's asked me to be clear: his mail is always carefully screened. If you could let us know when it arrives, we'll happily come down and collect it. No need to touch the box at all, really. Even though—he swears—it's perfectly harmless.

Best regards, and deepest apologies,

The "Smiths," in 37B

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## Coffee Break

*By Stephanie McPherson*

“I’m sorry, love,” he said. He couldn’t stop spending money. He’d pass something in a store and think of a million ways they could use it. A neighbor would get new tech and his computer would crash, or he’d accidentally spill water on his phone. But he’d finally gone too far. He decided he needed to see how many unread emails he could rack up: 22,000 and counting. Not to be limited by cloud space, he paid \$10 a month for more email storage.

“I understand.” She smiled at her husband. A victim to the lie of a perfect marriage, she now lived in fear of insolvency. They were losing the house; there’d be college bills to pay next year. Her only silver lining was that, should anything happen, he had a great life insurance policy. “Let’s just enjoy our coffee. I know how much you like almond lattes.”

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## A Type of Man

*By Eva Holmes*

The stink of burnt bacon made him queasy.

The guy ahead of him wasn't giving up. "It's perfect. My daughter's gone for the weekend. We can be alone."

The woman behind the counter was noncommittal. "Your neighbor's so nosy. Can't we do a hotel again?"

"Why should we hide our love?"

"Because my husband would kill us if he knew."

The man waiting for his lunch couldn't stand it anymore. "Excuse me, is my club sandwich ready yet?"

She slung the blackened meat onto the lettuce, slapped a slice of bread on top, and gave the plate an angry push towards her impatient customer. Too angry. The dish crashed to the floor.

It was no accident. He'd been tempted to taste pork before wiping the slate clean with his righteous death, but Allah had other plans. Leaving the sandwich where it was, he walked into the crowd.

## Crazy Talk

*By Linda Reilly*

“I fear you’ve gone a touch crazy, detective,” Maisie said with a smirk. “Everything you’ve said is an absolute lie. I’ve been here alone all night. My daughter is gone—no doubt slinking around with her lowlife boyfriend—and my husband is at the club. It wasn’t until my neighbor nearly bashed my door down that I learned about the accident.” She shuddered. “It’s ironic, though. Especially with him being a former race car driver. Wouldn’t you think he’d have known how to avoid a crash?”

“So you absolutely deny tampering with his brake lines?”

“Of course I do. The last time I saw that Lexus was at the country club on Friday, parked in its usual spot.”

“Your perfect alibi just crashed and burned, Maisie. Jimmy had three cars. How did you know which one’s brake lines had been cut if you hadn’t cut them yourself?”

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## **Acid Reflux**

*By Cynthia Gould*

Her once flawless face bears the scars of a horrific burn. It wasn't a fire. It wasn't an accident. The throwing of acid into a crowd gave her membership into an exclusive club: those who survived. And even though her husband recoils at her touch, and her daughter views her with horror, she refuses to hide her appearance. From her seat in the viewing room, she'll watch the state-sanctioned killing of the man who changed her life forever. Her fear will die with him. Despite the fact that her perfect life is gone, nothing will make her play the role of victim. She is a fighter, and she is a survivor, and she alone can make her life whole again.

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# Anonymous Dog Saves the Day

*By KB Inglee*

Claire and I are perfect partners. She has a bum hip, and I'm her service dog.

We were alone on the street, so I wasn't paying as much attention. Someone leapt out of hiding, grabbed Claire's briefcase, and was gone.

She crashed to the sidewalk.

This was no accident.

Nature told me to chase him, but my training kept me glued to her side. There was nothing I could do but bark for help.

Claire sat up, shaking with fear, rubbed the concrete burn on her elbow and said, "The final exam, he got it."

Our upstairs neighbor came to our rescue and helped Claire up.

He handed her the briefcase. "Your dog must have scared him."

He pulled a mouthful of the perp's shirt from between my teeth. "What's this?"

I didn't even realize I had touched him.

Big hug from Claire.

I love my job.

# Pool Party

*By Tom Lyons*

I sat in the meeting of spousal abuse survivors.

“You can no longer hide in fear. You have to face the fact that you are a victim, but you are no longer alone. Abusers must be put in jail...”

I tuned out, doing a slow burn about last time, when I had him locked up on their advice. He got out, came and beat me up and threatened to take my daughter away from me.

But now he's gone. My neighbors were having a pool dug in their back yard, it was dusk, and they weren't around. My husband was standing on the edge, drunk as usual. I saw the two-by-four on the ground, grabbed it, and hit him in the back of the head as hard as I could.

Burying him in that hole was nothing short of perfect. Well, that and watching them pour the concrete.

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## Smother Love

*By Claire Murray*

“Honey, where’s the mustard for your sandwich?” My search had yielded none. I rubbed the bruise on my arm.

Dave stood in the doorway. “Last time you used mustard, I burned my tongue. Use mayo.”

“You’re killing yourself with cholesterol, dear husband.” Darn. The mustard would hide the other taste.

“I love it when you smother love me.” He reached for the plate. It slipped and crashed to the floor.

I smiled. “Don’t touch that mess. Go meet the new neighbors and I’ll fix you another. Be back soon. We have to hide the presents before Bill and Debbie arrive with the kids.”

“I love our daughter, but aren’t we going to the club tonight?”

“Never fear. We’re going.”

Debbie joined me in the ER later that night. “Mom, you didn’t.”

I rubbed my arm. “I’m a survivor and he—the perfect victim.”

# The Accident

*By Tonya Price*

My neighbor Marilyn and I were six when Mom pointed at our Buick parked on the side of the road overlooking the lake. "I forgot my keys. Stay here."

"Okay."

I lied.

Mom's blue eyes betrayed her fear. I waved goodbye. She hurried down the stairs to where Marilyn's mother waited with our infant brothers.

Left alone, I raised a stick like a club. Marilyn whimpered and wrapped her arms around her head to hide.

A pickup rounded the bend. I smiled. My touch was firm when I pushed.

Car tires squealed on the asphalt. Rubber burned. Marilyn said nothing as the wheels crushed her. The driver's body crashed through the windshield. The car tumbled over the cliff.

The arriving mothers stared at their daughters, then screamed for their husbands.

Two accident victims. One crime. No survivors. My rival gone.

I'd found the love of my life: a perfect killing.

# Neighbors

*By Mary Brookman*

I watched a red Camaro follow the moving van, swerve, and crash into a hedge next door. The blonde driver tumbled onto the grass.

This one's gonna be easy. Accident-prone, so maybe a fire in which she burns to death or a gas explosion, zero survivors. No, can't destroy the house or no nearby future victims.

I moved to the side door. She peeked up at me under wide, long-lashed blue eyes.

"New neighbor?" I said.

"I am."

"Come in. Live alone?"

"Yup, how 'bout you?" She gazed around.

"Just me."

"Your house is perfect," she said.

I thought about the bodies in the back yard.

She stumbled. I reached to prevent her fall but was thrown off balance when she veered and propelled me forward. A crowbar loomed over me before it dropped. Excruciating pain, then nothing.

"Gone," she laughed.

## Empty Lives

*By Carol Perry*

It was my fault. I won't hide it.

Missy, my sweet daughter with so much love and promise, taken from me in a needless automobile crash. What use is my empty life now?

It should have been the perfect accident.

While I was at a writers' convention, Tomcat, my sorry husband, sped home late from the club. He veered off the dark country road headed for a stone wall. He couldn't stop—I'd cut the brake cable. He smashed head-on into the wall. The car burst into flames. No one could have survived the burns.

Missy always feared being home alone and hitched a ride to the club with a neighbor heading into town. She wanted to be with her father. She'll be with him forever, now, a victim of my own blasted jealousy. How could I know that Missy was with him?

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# A Murder of Darlings

*By Kathleen Barrett*

She'd adored every one of her victims. Her love for them was so perfect, so blind, it rivaled the infatuation she'd felt for her first crush. But after a brief separation, she began to see them in a different light.

Oh, that second or third encounter can reveal so much. The flaws that hide themselves on the initial acquaintance: the boring, irrelevant blather, the small but insidious lies.

Had they continued to mask their deficiencies—as they had, with such cruelty, at the start—things might have gone differently. But their inadequacies leapt at her, screamed at her, and worst of all, humiliated her.

That was all it took. She showed no fear, no hesitation. A mere touch of her finger, and they were gone. Not a single goodbye for the darlings she'd so cherished a few days before. Just a ruthless slash and burn, until only 150 survivors remained.

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## The To-Do List

*By Linda S. Grochowalski*

Jezzie felt no remorse killing her husband, pushing him down the cellar stairs, breaking his neck. The man never finished a "To-Do List" in his life, so she finished him.

An instant later, four men, looking like accident survivors, settled in near the burning fire at her Supper Club. Notwithstanding the fear of being caught, she said, "Drinks?"

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As Jezzie brought four Bloody Mary glasses to their table, she heard one man say the words "To Do List." Curious, she snuck a peek at the paper on the table—the first name on it was hers.

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Their task was complete: Jezzie tumbled down the basement stairs, dead. All the Grim Reaper, Lucifer, Satan, and Beelzebub did was touch her, but it worked, the latest to be gone off their victims list. As they walked out the door in unison they said, "Goodbye, daughter; see you in Hell."

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# Empty Revenge

*By Barbara Eppich Struna*

Marcus couldn't hide his anger anymore. "That bitch will pay." He fired off a round of bullets. His accuracy was near-perfect. He inhaled and grinned. The smell of gunfire was addictive. He advanced across the rain-soaked forest floor with nothing but a loaded rifle.

The crash was no accident. He had to lie to the police. It worked. His wife knew better and left him. Now his family was gone, not even a goodbye. When the divorce was finalized, visitation rights taken away, his fear of being alone made him desperate. He needed to blame someone other than himself.

Patricia James, social worker, was the victim. In his vengeful and twisted mind, killing her was righteous. She interfered too much. No husband, daughter, or neighbor would stand in his way of getting even. And if they do, there would be no survivors.

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# A Perfect Killing

*By Pam Joplin*

Nothing.

That's what's left.

My neighbor's house,

Burned to the ground.

Hidden behind the fence, I watched them. Waited.

The survivors.

Son. Daughter. Wife.

Huddled on the front lawn.

Victims no more.

The firefighters waded through smoldering embers. Searching.

Marital love,

No longer existed here.

Replaced long ago by abuse, lies,

Fear.

I knew. I had lived through it myself.

“Susan?”

The wife looked up, startled.

“What happened?” the cop said.

She glanced my way. Furtive.

A firefighter lifted something from the ash.

This cop had been here before.

Coaxed the children out of hiding.

“Tell me,” he said.

She nodded.

I wondered how similar our stories would be.

“It was self-defense.”

She touched the fresh bruises that patterned her face,

Pulled her kids closer.

“He had a gun.”

The firefighter held up the pistol. An untraceable gift.

I palmed the butane lighter. My salvation.

And hers.

A perfect killing.

Ω

# The Husband

*By Dan Friedman*

Boston Sergeant Detective B. B. Swollen shivered while driving to his daughter's crash site, not knowing if there were any survivors.

He feared for her life.

*Was she alone or with her husband?*

He did not get to say goodbye.

Being a longtime detective, he knew the accident was her no-good husband's fault. The husband would lie, steal, and take advantage of everyone. Her husband drove the car, probably intending to kill her.

When B. B. found her car, his wheels screeched to a stop. He sprang to his daughter, leaving the engine running. He opened the door and saw the husband unconscious behind the wheel, and his beloved daughter next to him, both covered with blood. She opened her eyes at her daddy and smiled.

When B. B. touched her shoulder, he saw a bloody knife in her hand.

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# Desperation Divide

*By Heather Whitesel*

"Where was she...?" Emily wondered while trying to get her bearings. She seemed suspended and looking down at a crumpled metal roof. It looked like she had been in a crash in the SUV that belonged to her neighbor, Paul. "Where is Paul, and why am I in his vehicle alone?"

Instinctively, she suddenly felt like she needed to get out of the vehicle and hide. She reached to her safety belt latch, released herself with a thud onto the metal roof, and began crawling out of the vehicle.

She heard a whistling sound and felt a searing pain burn through her shoulder. As she realized she had been shot, her thoughts went to her husband and small daughter. She pushed her fear aside and decided she would not become a victim. She had to be one of the survivors...she was not ready to tell her family goodbye.

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# Goodbye, Donnie

*By Carol Kaufman*

We tried to make it look like an accident, but I won't lie: the perfect crime it wasn't. Car crashes aren't our area of expertise. After all, I'm a dental hygienist. My husband, Frank, the love of my life, is a dentist. But, then again, nothing is perfect, right? I figured, why wait for Don, that bastard neighbor of ours, to burn in hell? That could take forever. That is, if there even is a hell. And, if there isn't, then we'd better not lose this opportunity to get justice. If we wait, it'll be gone.

I swore I'd never let him victimize our daughter again. So we decided to take things into our own hands. Frank couldn't do it alone. And, truth be told, I actually enjoyed killing Donnie, knowing that our baby will never have to fear him again. Never have to feel his touch again.

Ω

## Enough

*By Marlene Kurban*

My poor love. He must have lost his balance. I'm sure the toxicology report will show how liquored up he was after his night at the club. One, two, perhaps three times the legal limit? It suddenly occurs to me that the club might fear that I'll sue. No matter whether it was an accident, no matter how he probably tried to hide how drunk he really was.

My only regret is our daughter will be upset that she never had a chance to say goodbye. Nothing else about this night bothers me. I just need to rehearse my story because I know they'll make me repeat it over and over. Thankfully, I barely need to lie. He left me home alone; he finally staggered in after midnight. He didn't see me waiting in the dark at the top of the stairs.

I pick up the phone and call 911.

Ω

# Switcheroo!

*By Joanne Bianco*

An undetected crime is deemed perfect. So what do you think? If I alone know that my neighbor is the victim, and if even he does not know that he is the victim, I have nothing to fear. So I will hide behind the house until he leaves, and sneak into the den via the open porch door. He kidnapped the original Navajo vase at the Club last year and left a replica in its place. This lie has been killing me for a year! I'm in, it's switched, and I'm done and gone. Little did he know that I'm dating his daughter, and she let it slip!

Ω

# **We Are Heartbroken**

*By Adelene Ellenberg*

We are heartbroken.

Our beautiful daughter lived life as a two-faced lie.

She tried to hide her love for her joy-riding, six-foot-tall neighbor, a motorcycle-mama whose perfect touch drove her wild.

We knew that neighbor was trouble. Parents can tell.

Our sweet, youngest child should've said goodbye to that home-breaker with the full-body tattoos and purple dreadlocks.

Our daughter's husband, a good-for-nothing creep, gave no clue about his killing ways. Outwardly, he looked like a choir-boy. Who knew?

Last night, he journeyed alone to the gay club on the deserted highway.

Our daughter and her lover were dancing cheek-to-cheek.

He poured gasoline and lit a match to burn it down; there were no survivors.

He said he was out to destroy the rot in his marriage.

Wouldn't a simple divorce have been easier?

## Taking Back Control

*By Joan Wright Mularz*

Her husband smiled. The wine was chilled, dinner didn't burn, and candles were lit—a perfect celebration. He wrapped her in a hug and whispered, “Was the first day of your dream job fantastic, love?”

He felt her body shiver. “God, no. It was awful. I was working alone when he came in and leaned too close. I felt him touch my breast.”

“Your famous boss? Are you sure it wasn't an accident?”

“I called the woman I replaced. She said, ‘Welcome to the club.’ She left because it got worse. So did others.”

“Assault is against the law! Did they report him?”

“Yes, but it's their word against his and he's powerful. Nothing has been proven and it's killing them. It's up to me now. I'll wear a wire.”

“No job is worth being a victim!”

“I'll quit after I make him crash and he's gone!”

# Testimony

By Gabriel Valjan

“Your account doesn’t hold water. Stranger in town, is that it? No license on you.”

“I took the bus.”

“Witnesses place you at the club. A neighbor stated the wife had words with the victim before she arrived, alone. He ends up dead. Coincidence? Anything you’d like to add?”

“Nothing. You said so yourself: *before*. We ate, we talked.”

“Dinner and goodbye. And you didn’t know him?”

“Should I?”

“An affair then? That’s motive, my friend. Point is—a car like that doesn’t just crash and burn. No such thing as a perfect accident.”

“You have my statement.”

“It’s a lie. You ought to know something about that.”

An officer walked in, cupped a hand over the microphone. Whispers.

“The diocese corroborated your story.”

“I’d like to speak to her now.”

“Because you’re a priest.”

“Was. I’m her husband. Spousal privilege.”

# The Note

By Connie Campbell Berry

Jonas Pye stared at the square of paper in his hand:  
TONIGHT YOU BURN.

So, it had come to this.

A year ago life was idyllic. Snug little house, lovely garden. Peaceful, quiet. Then the neighbors moved in with that yappy dog, above-ground pool, and music blaring half the night. He'd called the police. That's when things got nasty. Burning leaves accidentally raked against the shed. Rose bushes clubbed to death. Threats shoved through the mail slot. Fear tactics.

"Let it go," his daughter said. Nope. Not anymore. He slid the note in his pocket. Survivors take the prize, not victims.

Jonas crept past the neighbors' charred shed toward their house. He pushed the note through the mail slot, poured gasoline, struck the match.

*Goodbye. Good Riddance.*

That's when he saw the flaw. The neighbors would never see his note. Smoke would get them first.

*Oh well. Nothing's perfect.*

# Writer's Block

*By Stacey Altieri*

He's the perfect man. They watch her husband spray the garden, carefully avoiding the small white cloud. Sweat glistens on his bare chest.

“You can't be this in love after a whole year. Nothing this intense can last that long without a crash and burn.”

But her neighbor is wrong. It's actually growing stronger. Lila hadn't foreseen this all-consuming addiction. She'd been blinded by a joy second only to that of publishing her first novel. Then, she'd stopped writing. A victim to writer's block after twelve years. Suddenly, she has only three months before her next book is due.

In the car now, they watch him gulp the cold, tart lemonade. He hesitates, looks puzzled, then shrugs and downs the last three gulps. Wiping his mouth on a sinewy forearm, he smiles seductively at her as his lips touch his hand. Smiling back sadly, she pulls away and waves goodbye.

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# Not My Fault

*By Sharon Ward*

There could be no survivors. The heat from the crash is horrific, but I stand by the driver's door with my club until I'm certain no one will emerge from the "accident."

I would have liked to touch my husband one last time, say goodbye to my daughter, but they are gone. Goodbye, my loves. I will miss you.

I feel nothing for my neighbor, who is in there with them. She had shown no fear when she took their love from me. Well, I'd bet she was plenty scared now. Let her burn, damn her hide.

They were the dead ones, but I was the victim here. She had come between us, destroying our perfect love. Our perfect life. I didn't believe in killing, but I couldn't live a lie.

The flames die down, and I am alone.

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# **Killing Time**

*By Karen Whalen*

Finally. The King of Clubs. The card I'd been waiting for killing time with a game of Solitaire. I peered out through the crack where the kitchen curtains didn't meet. Lester's television bled blue onto the fresh snow that separated our condos.

My husband gone on a business trip, his first since my accident. I clung to him as we said our goodbyes. My struggles to perfect the lie had paid off—he believed me when I said I was recovered.

Anything comes up, call Lester, he said. Of all my neighbors, Lester alone had something to fear.

Or why not play the dutiful daughter and go stay with your mother? he offered on his way out. He knew my mother meant nothing to me. Love you, too, I whispered as the door shut between us.

The Queen of Hearts waited in the pile. I trembled in anticipation. Another victim.

# **The Killing**

*By Dru Ann Love*

The wind blew. The tide came crashing in and being alone scared her more than she was willing to admit. Her daughter, her husband, everything is gone. Too many victims. No one is perfect. How will she survive all the mess that was left behind? She once thought that the killing would make her stronger, but yet her fear was overpowering. She knew that one day she would be found and would have to say goodbye. Never again would she hide the truth as to what really happened.

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## There's Always Plan Two

*By Grace Topping*

Nothing is perfect—not even the best murder plan. My husband, the intended victim, was leaving me for our neighbor's daughter. A crash and burn accident would be too quick, and he might be one of those survivors who escape mutilated cars untouched. I wanted him to feel fear as he lay alone dying, knowing that I was the one killing him. I decided to hide a poison mushroom in his favorite dish, stroganoff. Everyone knew I was allergic to mushrooms and wouldn't touch them. As extra insurance, I waved goodbye and left for my card club. How was I to know that while I was gone he would feed the stroganoff to our poodle and have dinner with his new love?

Plan two: see him marry her. If what her mother revealed about her isn't a lie, his life will be a living hell.

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# The Survivors Club

*By Eleanor Ingbretson*

Lovely, trusting, and single, our neighbor Bill was entering his dotage when our home accidentally burned. He was very financially solicitous when approached.

It wasn't the first time we'd lost a home, had cars destroyed in mysterious crashes, or been left with nothing after being victimized by thieves.

Bill, who'd made a killing on the market, was certainly a dear, but the Survivors Club handled media, paperwork, and those unpleasant wrongful accusations. The Club enabled us to cope with survivor's guilt, or any guilt, after being touched by tragedy. Thankfully our daughter is now old enough to join, because you just can't get by alone in this imperfect world.

Bill has bequeathed his fortune to his new wife, our daughter. A dear man, but so curious and loquacious. When he's gone, the Club will help our daughter find closure and say her goodbyes.

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# Burn Out

*By Robin Stuart*

I watched the neighbor say goodbye to her husband. She touched his face tenderly that morning, as if she planned to be away for a while. While their house burned to the ground two days later, he stood in the street with the rest of us, yet alone. He said nothing while firefighters controlled the blaze.

The dog sniffed out an accelerant,” I overheard a police K-9 handler say. “This was no accident.”

The husband turned away, cell phone in hand.

“Sir?” the police officer said. “Was anyone else home?”

The man shook his head, staring at the phone. “She’s gone.”

“Who’s gone, sir? Was your wife in the house?”

The man hung his head. “She couldn’t live the lie anymore. The house felt empty without her.”

The officer waited. “What lie?” he prompted after several long minutes.

“She wasn’t my wife,” the man said. “She was my daughter.”

# Crash

*By Frances McNamara*

A neighbor heard the crash. When Lucy ran out to check, she found the husband and daughter watching the SUV burn. The Allens.

“It was an accident,” the girl said. More neighbors poured from houses on the hill, eyes glued to the blazing vehicle impaled on the old telephone pole. They walked slowly until they surrounded the survivors. “It was an accident,” the girl repeated.

The smell of gasoline was pungent. The smell of burning flesh was repugnant. The fireman from next door pulled the victim out of the car before anyone could stop him. Lucy held an elbow to her nose as she went to help him. She saw the wound in the forehead.

Brad Allen stooped to touch the smoldering corpse. “Goodbye, my love,” he said, then looked into Lucy’s eyes. “She was too perfect, she was killing Marcie. The girl just snapped. What could a father do?”

## The Feline Survivors

*By Verena Rose*

Victoria Rushmore recently lost her husband and needing a break went to visit her daughter living in Maine. While there, they discovered that a neighbor had been the victim of a killing. Instead of the visit being the perfect respite from her grief, she felt more alone than ever. She did, however, have the love of two Ragdoll cats—one an accident waiting to happen. As it happened, the murdered man had two little kittens. In a search of his house, they were found trying to hide, and it took some time to convince them they had nothing to fear. When they finally let Victoria touch them, she knew with their human gone, she had to add them to her family. Bidding goodbye to her daughter, she headed home, content in the knowledge that finally she qualified as a *bona fide* member of the “Crazy Cat Ladies’ Club.”

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# **My Rescue Dog**

*By Mary Small*

The crash had no victims. The only injuries were from my husband's fists, beating his girlfriend for her careless driving—as witnessed by everyone who tuned in for that night's news. The local TV station, on the scene to televise a burning clubhouse nearby, filmed it all. The broadcast gave my lawyer enough evidence to let me say goodbye to my cheating, abusive spouse and win custody of my daughter. The publicity ensured that he could no longer touch us, we didn't need to hide, and we would no longer live in fear.

The fire didn't hurt anyone, and my one lie was the name on the form I filled out at the pound. I had seen the dog make it safely across the street before the accident it caused. It's still gone, but I think I saw it playing with a neighbor's child yesterday.

Nothing could be more perfect.

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# Justice

*By Ruth McCarty*

“Your husband has been in a crash,” the baby-faced officer said. “Sorry. There were no survivors.”

I felt nothing. No tears. No fear. No guilt at what I’d done. Then the officer’s words slowly sank in. “Wait. Someone else was in the accident?”

“Yes,” he said.

Perfect! I thought. I hadn’t planned on that when I’d messed with my husband’s brakes, but talk about justice. My neighbor Julie, his new love, gone, too.

“Ma’am. You may want to sit down for this.”

Sit down! I wanted to jump for joy. I tried to hide my smile as the officer led me to a chair.

He kneeled before me and whispered, “Your daughter was driving.”

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## Lost Lives

*By Harriette Sackler*

Ronnie Ingram was devastated when her husband and sixteen-year-old daughter were killed in an automobile accident. A drunken driver had veered into their lane on the highway. The crash left no survivors other than the intoxicated perpetrator. Ronnie had no time to say goodbye to her loved ones, to touch their beautiful faces, or to tell them how much she loved them. Ronnie, too, became a victim of that awful night. Her perfect life was gone and she could find nothing for which to live.

One morning a dear friend and neighbor stopped by to offer comfort and support to the heartbroken woman. But, tragically, it was too late. Nothing could be done to bring Ronnie back to life. She had died alone, the victim of a broken heart.

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# Home Invasion

*By Mo Walsh*

Two men, wearing masks to hide their faces, crashed open our door.

The first one shoved me. “Where is it?”

“Don’t touch her!” my husband shouted.

The second guy clubbed him with a gun. “Nothing I love better than babes, man, so listen up!”

“Deliver the fent, and we’re gone,” said Shover. “Lie, and goodbye to your woman.”

“Leave her alone!” Joe’s voice cracked with fear. “We don’t have anything.”

Clubber struck him again. “You want killing, man? Where’s our stash?”

“We don’t understand!” I pleaded.

“The fenty, dance fever, sublimaze?” Shover said like it was perfect English. “You burned Sergei with skunk and no friend.”

“Real dumb, Beckman,” said Clubber.

“Beckman?” I laughed, even knowing we could still be victims. “You’re here by accident. They’re our neighbors.”

They tied and gagged us, then headed next door. I prayed the Beckmans, their young son and daughter, would be survivors, too.





