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# 10 BY 10

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**FLASH FICTION STORIES**



**NUMBER 9    MAY 2023**

Welcome to Issue #9. Please enjoy the ten excellent writers presented herein. They come to you from the U.S., U.K. and Belarus. Their diverse work provides different points of view about life. I hope you like 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 five-time Pushcart Prize nominee. His most recent poetry chapbook is *Simple Game & Ghost of Fenway* (Alien Buddha Press). Sesling recently published *Wheels* (Alien Buddha Press), a flash fiction chapbook. His full volume flash fiction book, *Secret Behind The Gate*, will be published in May 2023 by Cervena Barva Press. He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



## **Laura Weiss**

is an author and journalist with work published by *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *The New York Times*, NPR, *Travel + Leisure*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Interior Design*, *The New York Daily News*, Food Network, and many others. Laura was a reporter for *CQ Weekly* covering Congress and national politics. She was a writer for *TIME*'s school edition, news editor for *School Library Journal*, a writer for *Library Journal*, and an editor of *Zagat Long Island Restaurant Guide 2009-2011*. Laura was a nonfiction book reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* and is a reviewer for *Bellevue Literary Review*. She was also an adjunct professor of journalism at New York University. She is the author of *Ice Cream: A Global History* (Reaktion Books/University of Chicago Press 2011). *Ice Cream* has been translated into Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

### The Last Time We Ate Sushi

Meet at the cheapish sushi joint. Glance at your wife biting into a tuna roll. The wife who once slept with you. The wife who made you Sunday morning pancakes, who every night came back to you by six.

Flinch when she grabs her briefcase and says, "I need to work late. Got a ton to do. You know how it is."

"I don't," you say.

“Make sure you take out the garbage.” She shoots out the door, her look reducing you to the size of a paper clip. Order fresh-cooked salmon and bring it home to the grateful dog.

The next day, under CVS-fluorescence, scan a pawed-through rack of Valentines. See the pink hearts, the lace hearts, the broken hearts, arrows piercing bloated middles. Select twin birds wrapped in vines of purple posies with “We are joined together” inscribed in black cursive. You can say this and not be a liar.

Later, your wife texts, *I’m-sorry-to-have-to-skip-V-Day-but-I’ll-make-it-up-to-you-and-don’t-forget-to-pay-the-furnace-guy.*

Think of her melting brown eyes focused on everything but you. At your medical supply company, which you inherited from your father, dial 1-800-Divorce4U, but when a female voice answers and asks how she can help, end the call. Stare at the crutches, the bandages, the commodes. Think how your wife never asks about your work, how when you reach for her, she squirms free.

Back at the house, share Popeyes with the dog. Taste loneliness, a rancid flavor you recall from the boxed mac and cheese your mother left you the nights she was out dating. Tell yourself alone time is precious time, an air bubble in the marriage cave that houses your couplehood. Text your brother for the phone number of his killer divorce lawyer.

In the morning, your wife promises she’ll be home by six for make-up Valentine’s Day sushi. Set the table with the nice plates and the rumpled Valentine’s card, and when she arrives (almost on time) kiss her hard on the lips. Except she breaks free to hug the dog.

Her phone pings. “Sorry,” she says. “It’s my partner.”

Call out, “Wait,” as she runs into a room off the kitchen.

Hear her laugh, that bray of a laugh, a laugh you never liked, not even in your courtship days. In your head, Partner-Man and your wife romp around the room festooned with hearts. Listen to their cries of ecstasy. Call out your wife’s name and hear silence.

Give the locked door a smack, then stomp into the kitchen. Your dog burps. Eke out a smile. Polish off the tuna rolls and scoop up the desiccated salmon container before tossing it into the garbage. Leash the dog. Outside, in dark, the moon silvers the chain link fence encircling the yard. The gate rattles as you pass through.



### **A. Molotkov**

is an immigrant writer. His poetry collections are *The Catalog of Broken Things*, *Application of Shadows*, *Synonyms for Silence* and *Future Symptoms*. His novel *A Slight Curve* is forthcoming from Run Wild Press; he co-edits *The Inflectionist Review*. His collection of ten short stories, *Interventions in Blood*, is part of *Hawaii Review Issue 91*; his prose is represented by Laura Strachan at Strachan Lit. Please visit him at [AMolotkov.com](http://AMolotkov.com)

### **The Way Most of Us Must Go**

You approach the metal detector without giving it much thought: a harmless, pointless routine. The attendant waves you in.

Buzz!

You blink. Must be your belt buckle. You're relieved to remove the belt. Now your pants are falling off. You're a kid again, unencumbered by shame. The attendant waves you in.

Buzz!

What is it now? You wreck your brain. The coins. Loose change in your pocket. Indignantly, you toss the coins into a waste basket. The attendant waves you in.

Buzz!

What in the world could it be? With a sudden inspiration, you realize: it's your gold tooth. You didn't know gold was forbidden. You ask the attendant for a pair of pliers. It's a painful job, but you can't miss your flight. You swallow the blood. The attendant waves you in.

Buzz!

You begin to stress. It must be your pacemaker. The box cutter in your pocket will do. You make a careful cut. Is it safe to remove the pacemaker on its own? You take out the entire heart, which fits snugly in the wallet dish. Now you hope to go through – but the attendant's face turns pale. He stares at your box cutter as if it were a snake, a shark. "He's armed!" Other passengers fall on the floor, covering their heads. A dozen armed men materialize, their automatic weapons trained on you.

"Think really hard." The attendant frowns. "Are you carrying anything else metallic?"

"I think that's it."

The attendant waves you in.

Buzz!

The armed men open fire.



## **Paul Germano**

lives in Syracuse, smack dab in the center of New York State, with his dog April, a beautiful, loyal and strong Pit Bull mix who adores him almost as much as he adores her. Germano's fiction has been published in roughly 50 print and online magazines in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, including *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *The Fictional Café*, *Sledgehammer Literary Journal*, *Voices in Italian Americana* and *Word City Literary Journal*. His flash, "A Springer Spaniel Named Jerry" appeared in *10 By 10's* September 2022 issue.

## **BUSTED**

The clock ticks like a time bomb. Madeline Windsor, fortysomething and willowy, is sprawled out flat, her left arm dangling over the side of the bed. She burrows her lean lined face into the pillow and shuts her pale green eyes without the desired results. Her husband; his sweaty body, thick, muscular and athletic; sleeps next to her. He shifts restless and relentless; but remains asleep. Madeline envies him for that. Count sheep, she tells herself, but gives up on the seventh fluffy sheep floating over the rustic fence in her sleepless thoughts. An important overnight business trip weighs heavy on her mind and unfinished business here at home adds to her anxiety. Just a gut feeling, nothing more. And nothing less.

On the blue chair, her overnight bag, packed and ready to roll; her outfit for the Greyhound ride neatly laid out; plus a clipboard with her major talking points,

jotted down and well-rehearsed, for her meeting with the firm's muckety-mucks down in Philadelphia.

On the floor, in a heap, her husband's crumpled-up khakis, ketchup-stained golf shirt, knock-around penny loafers and dirty tan socks; tossed off in a chaotic frenzy right before the lights went out, his blue eyes tightly closed; his sweating solid mass, asleep five minutes after he hit the sheets.

On the dresser, next to a framed photograph of her sweet Italian grandmother recently deceased, a porcelain vase of white and purple lilacs freshly picked from the trees in the backyard. Her husband pitched a fit at bedtime: "Smells too damn girly in here." But she stood her ground. The fragrant lilacs remain in place, a small but important victory.

"Fall asleep, just fall asleep," she tells herself. Her husband isn't helping, not one iota. The bed bounces lightly from his sporadic movements while he sleeps, a fully-loaded smile stretches across his ruddy face. "Tomorrow my wife's away," he mumbles in his sleep, "call me then."

Madeline stretches her neck, her eyes blinking rapidly; she props herself up, forces herself to get a good look at her husband's betraying smile. She wants to be surprised, but his words merely confirm what she already knows. She kisses his forehead, then slowly touches her lean fingers to her own soft lips to stop herself from speaking too loudly. "I'm done with you," she says in a barely audible whisper, brushing a fast hand under her chin to emphasize her words. "Tomorrow, I'll be down in Philly; oh, I'll be gone alright. Tomorrow, I'll be gone for good." Sadly content with her decision, she settles into her pillow, her back to her husband, closes her eyes and drifts softly into a sweet sleep.





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## **Sue du Feu**

has been writing on and off for more than 30 years. She has a BA in Drama 1992 and an MA in Screenwriting 1996. She was commissioned by youth theatres to devise pieces with young people, and by museums to write monologues, stories and a musical. In 2012 she wrote and directed ‘Togo’ a short film which was accepted by three film festivals. [www.sukisuzy.com/films/](http://www.sukisuzy.com/films/) In 2020 she joined the London Writers Salon and has made podcasts for ‘Fantasy Holidays in the Time of Covid’, written short stories, flash fiction, children’s stories, a radio play, stage play and a feature film. She also has a monthly newsletter - <https://suedufeu.substack.com>

## **The Massage**

She watched idly as the masseuse got to work on a youngish, evenly tanned woman who was occupying the sunbed next to hers on the packed beach. A woman who saw the sun for five minutes and went brown without effort. She looked at the mottled areas of her own body with envy and recalled that her half-Italian husband’s skin also had wonderful tanning properties. He had always made fun of her when his legs bronzed by the second day of any holiday in the sun, while hers remained stubbornly purple, due, he sneered, to her bad circulation.

The little army of Asian massage ladies marched onto the beach every day wearing white blouses, black capri pants and sunhats. They chattered and smiled and cajoled prone, submissive sunbathers into rolling over for a back and shoulder massage. In ten winters here, she had never had a massage. Her husband had always waved them away, like he waved away the beach throw and sunglass sellers. She felt odd being in this familiar place without him, making her own decisions without incurring his disapproving glares. She continued to watch the lady's hands as she firmly kneaded the woman's shoulders and back. The woman relaxed under the pressure and after a few minutes appeared to drift off to sleep.

The masseuse looked up, caught her eye and smiled. Before she could stop herself, she smiled back. Oh Lord, what did that mean, she wondered. Had she committed herself to a massage by smiling? Don would have been furious that she had encouraged one of them. She looked at the cellulite in her legs and arms. She couldn't do it, too embarrassing. But what would she say to the lady, how would she refuse?

She squirmed and turned back to her book, wondering how to get out of the situation she perceived herself to be in. She took a sip of her wine and closed her eyes. Perhaps Don had been right all those years. Maybe she shouldn't be left on her own, because, as he said, she was too foolish. He had made all decisions large and small for the last thirty-five years, which she had accepted because it was better than Don in a stroppy mood, sulking for days.

She glanced apprehensively from behind sunglasses as the masseuse picked up her bag and, after a moment's hesitation, moved to a very large man a few sunbeds down. He rolled over with difficulty at her approach, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Relief, she realised, more than tinged with disappointment. As she watched, the masseuse poured oil on the man's huge back, glancing up at her as she did so. On impulse, she raised her hand to the lady. 'Me next, please', she said, as it dawned on her that it didn't matter what Don would have thought. Those days were over.



### **Nina Rubinstein Alonso's**

work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Nixes Mate*, *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, *Peacock Journal*, etc. Her book *This Body* was published by David Godine Press, her chapbook *Riot Wake* by Cervena Barva Press, her story collection *Distractions En Route: A Dancer's Notebook* and other stories by Ibbetson Street Press.

### Cambridge Snapshot

Biking down Mass. Ave., ponytail flapping, he passes a scooter, ear-bud joggers, a girl texting on her phone. A gray Honda door swings close and he whacks it out of the way with the side of his fist.

“What the hell?” the driver yells.

Pedals through the intersection, parks at Simon's coffee shop, slips off his backpack, starts pinning blue flyers to the cork bulletin board. A woman stands waiting, her hair like a fluffy lavender dandelion.

The friend arrives, stoop-shouldered, short and plump. The cafe's narrow as a bowling-alley, usually jammed, have to wait for a black marble table until someone gets up and leaves. The drinks are frothy, the sandwiches and pastries a la Française, but the black bistro chairs uncomfortably narrow even for slender bodies. The two substantial women look, don't go in.

Bike guy's zipping his backpack, shaggy sneakers so worn his ankles tilt. Lavender woman's friend asks for a flyer, and he gives her a blue one, watches the women walk away, then slips his pack over his shoulder, rolls his bike toward Linnaean Street.

I cover the camera lens, as people can get annoyed at a stranger taking their photo without permission, don't care about my curiosity. Last week I managed closeups of a gaggle of turkeys in Harvard Square, cars slowed down, people laughed, as big toms can get nasty.

In the yard next to the coffee shop a kid's kicking a soccer ball into the hedges yelling 'Score!', his high stakes fantasy game. I cross the street, consider getting coffee, hear the kid shout 'Score' again.

My phone's blinking. Someone texting? Nope, just spam junk.



### **Irina Tall (Novikova)**

is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator living in Minsk, Belarus. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room* and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection *The 50 Best Short Stories*, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry *The wonders of winter*.

### **Sometimes snow**

Sometimes snow covers our sorrows, sometimes it becomes a salvation for us and, like a wonderful elephant, leads us out of our own desert.

"Why didn't you want to open your eyes then?"

"I didn't want to feel anything .. I wanted to be myself and not perceive the world that surrounded me..."

Her feathers stirred a little in the wind.

And suddenly the world fell into the dark span of the building... And what could happen there?

Her eyes became two slits, two small lightning bolts in her fair face. The black hair was confused and took on the shape of a dish in which a bird can make a nest.

She no longer wanted to write, she lay on a blue-red bedspread cut through with white stripes like a knife, and looked at the yellowish screen.

She began to have frequent nightmares where she was behind something black and vast, behind something that might not be part of her, but was absorbing her. And today she dreamed of a unicorn, he walked on gray slabs with dark slots, smooth like sown meadows in China.

And she thought that nothing could be eternal, something that is different.

There was a dove, also white, the sun rose and it melted, because it was made of snow. And during the day, only a small puddle remained from it.

And then she walked up the stairs, up the twisted loop of the flight, and all the time looked up, she wanted to find wings and could not.

She opened her eyes, the dream left her ... But she so wanted to draw a unicorn, paint it in bright colors, so that it would take on the color of the bright rays of the sun, she sighed and the dream embraced her again, became part of her and she could do nothing more. She sailed for a long time in a blue boat that looked like night, her hands were transparent, and the dark arrow of the oar moved as if by itself, drawn only by the current in the ocean.

A blue bird with a red head flew up to her, sat on the edge of her boat and sang a wondrous, wonderful song, small red flashes began to fly out of her throat, and soon the whole world was on fire with her song.

The oar swayed in her invisible hands and she wanted to put out the fire that she saw.

"Don't swim there .. don't swim .." - the voice repeated to her, he beckoned her back.



## **Jessica Klimesh**

is a US-based writer and editor whose flash fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Complete Sentence*, *The Dribble Drabble Review*, *Microfiction Monday Magazine*, *Cleaver*, *Atticus Review*, *trampset*, *Ghost Parachute*, and *Bending Genres*, among others.

### **Small Talk**

Over dinner, I ask you what your favorite color is, and you say *I hate small talk, ask me something else*. So I say *Why isn't the opposite of small talk called big talk?* You let me spend the night anyway, our first time together. When our bodies touch, I say *Is this okay?* You smile and put your naked finger to my naked lip and say *Shh, none of those kinds of questions either. I'd tell you if it wasn't.*

This whatever-it-is-between-us goes on in uninterrupted, unquestioning waves. We discuss climate change and spy balloons and you wonder out loud if anyone really uses Peloton bikes or those endless swimming pools you see commercials for.

Are we exclusive? I'm afraid to ask.

It's a few months later when you say it's red, your favorite color. I'd forgotten that I'd even asked. You say it casually, as you're prepping a mousetrap, after mice have been leaving droppings under your sink for weeks. You dab a globule of peanut butter into the trap, then change your mind. *No, not red*, you say. *Blue*.





## **William Cass**

has had over 295 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. He won writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*. A nominee for both Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net anthologies, he has also received five Pushcart Prize nominations. His first short story collection, *Something Like Hope & Other Stories*, was published by Wising Up Press in 2020, and a second collection, *Uncommon & Other Stories*, was recently released by the same press. He lives in San Diego, California.

## **Obituary**

Several years ago, during my last semester as a journalism major, I got a part-time job at my college town's weekly newspaper. I was put in charge of the Police Blotter, obits, a community events calendar, and occasionally filled in for a reporter who covered the local high school's sports teams. I shared a desk with that reporter in the back corner of the "newsroom" which was really the downstairs of a refurbished two-family house just off our town's single main street.

I'd been on the job for less than two months and came into the empty newsroom one gloomy mid-February morning to find an unopened envelope on our desk. It had been postmarked a few days earlier and had "Attn: Obituaries" written in loopy script beside the newspaper's mailing address. There was no return address at all. I sat down and opened it in a wan shaft of sun that crept through what was once a dining room window. The envelope held a single sheet of old-fashioned stationery covered in the same script and a small black-and-white photograph with scalloped edges. A plain, unsmiling woman with permed hair and pointy glasses stared up at me from the photo. I flipped it over where the words: "Me, 1961, Age 22" were written by the same hand and felt myself frown.

I lifted the stationery up higher into the light. Its underlined heading read: "Obituary for Jane Corcoran". A short narrative followed:

"Jane Corcoran passed from this earth on February 10, 2018, at the age of 79. She was alone in her apartment at the time of her death. Jane was born and raised in the Northeast on a dairy farm. She had no siblings, never married, and had no remaining family. She worked her entire adult life as a public librarian assistant whose responsibilities primarily involved cataloguing, covering, and shelving books. She was a quiet, reserved person who enjoyed knitting, jigsaw puzzles, reading historical romances, and taking walks along the river. She once owned a cat. No services are planned nor donations requested."

Underneath, in parentheses, was a final line: "Respectfully submitted by Jane Corcoran – February 9, 2018".

I lowered the paper slowly to my desk. A chill had risen up my neck. I found myself studying the photograph and wondering why she'd chosen it to accompany her obituary before realizing I was about the same age as she'd been in it. I thought about her long, solitary life, the work she'd devoted herself to, the way she'd filled all her breathing hours until she'd decided that their time to end had come. Suddenly, I pictured her cat, and a tightness gripped my throat. I stared outside where a naked tree branch nodded on the cold breeze as if in silent, somber affirmation.



### **Teresa Burns Gunther**

is an award-winning author whose fiction and nonfiction have been published widely in US and international literary journals and anthologies. Her story collection *Hold Off The Night*, a Finalist for the Orison Book Prize 2019, is forthcoming from Truth Serum Press, a subsidiary of Bequem Publishing, May 2023. Her stories have been recognized in numerous contests, including “War Paint”, awarded the 52nd New Millennium Award for Fiction, 2022. She is the founder of Lakeshore Writers where she leads workshops and classes and offers coaching and developmental editing services.

### **Laughing Man**

Desiccated leaves litter the cobbled lane Alister runs across. It's near dark as he climbs the church's steps, inciting an eruption of pigeons. Startled, he kicks out, curses.

"Bloody flying rats."

A woman wrapped in ragged shawls, growls at him from where she sits spraddle legged on the stone steps. Seeds fill the expanse of her skirt that makes a table of her massive lap where birds perch and peck. The spectacle of her horrifies him. He turns away.

"Darling," Deirdre said, when she'd called earlier, "Meet me tonight." She texted an address. "Under the laughing man. You won't be disappointed!" As always, her voice elicited his arousal as he imagined her pouty lips, saw her toy with her thick, dark hair. He never says no.

He buttons his trench coat against London's chill and circles the church, searches its roof line of bizarre gargoyles and buttresses. He finds no *laughing man*. His doubt prickles with annoyance. He checks his watch. She's late. Again. And their nine-year gap nags at him.

A red double-decker, its windows steamed, stops at the kerb but no one gets off. Bird lady, wide bum swaying, lumbers aboard. The birds leave, too.

He feels his aloneness keenly as fog lowers, intensifying the gloom.

Discovering that she chose a church for their destination he'd allowed himself a second of hope. That she'd twirl, cup his cheeks, kiss him, finally say *Yes!* He proposed seven months ago but she keeps stringing him along.

She wanted to show him a gargoyle? Why? He searches his memory of past conversations and comes up with nothing more than her teasing.

He texts: *Where are you?*

No response.

At a sound above him, Alistair spins around, sees only a stone monkey. Did its head turn? No. Now even the dark is playing tricks.

"Five more minutes," he threatens no one and sits on a cold step. A horned creature with bulging muscles and murderous fangs perches above him on the wall. Alistair pulls his trench coat tighter, closes his eyes, wonders where she is.

A taxi pulls up and he stands but an elderly couple get out. They are rumped in comfortable unison. They hold hands. The man in a tweed cap says something to the woman in her puffy coat. She throws her head back and laughs, then turns, cups his cheeks, kisses him. They stand, smiling into each other's wrinkled faces and Alistair feels robbed. Was one of *them* once unattainable? Did one of them have to wait? How long?

Alistair turns back to the church, eyes the gargoyles with their lascivious grins that tell him he's a fool. He hurries out from under their cold and stony gaze, desperate for warmth.



## **Linda McMullen**

is a wife, mother, daughter, diplomat, and homesick Wisconsinite. Her short stories and the occasional poem have appeared in over one hundred fifty literary magazines. She may be found on Twitter: @LindaCMcMullen.

### **Holiday Brunch**

“So have you met someone?”

The chorus at every family holiday. Mom and Dad, arm in arm in front of the fireplace, Mom spotting a dust mote on the TV and Dad bellowing about his fishing trophy; Uncle Nate taking umbrage at any implication that he’s double-dipped his Ruffles in my mother’s Hidden Valley Ranch Dip; Aunt Sharon pretending she hasn’t downed three at the bar before arriving; Uncle Marcus leering at every woman under thirty who appears on the television; Aunt Nicole lecturing us on the evils of non-organic poultry consumption; Grandma stabbing her embroidery with unwonted vigor; assorted cousins tending their squalling broods – they all lean in when Grandpa poses this question.

I’m thirty-seven. I’m working on a PhD. I’ve traveled to over four different countries this year. I closed on my first condo. I go out with friends regularly, I’m taking Zumba classes, and I’m in a book club. Why doesn’t that check the ‘full life’ box?

They're still leaning.

Cousin Jeremy's here too, but he's hiding in the guest room re-reading *The Simarillion*. He's my favorite.

"I'm finishing my coursework in the spring," I say.

"Jen-ni-fer, you can't put it off forever," Grandpa chants, wagging a finger. The feral version of me would bite it off. I arch an eyebrow. My grandmother pointedly ignores him. And me.

"I went with a two-bedroom condo so I could have an office," I add.

"You know," said Aunt Sharon, "there's a nice man in my office – Keith – divorced, with one young son – he's a champion angler –"

"No thanks," I say, breezily. She lurches toward the wine; I pluck a water bottle from the cooler and hand it to her. She frowns. I reach for a napkin to wipe my dripping hand and jostle Uncle Nate and his bitten chip. "Hey, let me get a spoon for you," I say. I feel Uncle Marcus's eyes on my rear.

In the kitchen, I run into my mother.

"They mean well."

"Do they?"

Dad says, "You know, that Keith sounds great –"

"He'd probably be a wonderful fishing buddy for you, Dad," I say, grabbing a spoon. "Maybe *you* should get his number." Dad glares. Aunt Nicole interrupts:

"I've got this new vegan life coach – single –"

"Pass!"

"You haven't even heard –"

"I've heard plenty!" I snap. The entire family gapes. My stomach rumbles. I turn away from the chips and dip, the cheese-and-tomato mini-skewers on toothpicks, and my extended family. I head to the guest room, where Jeremy's about to delve back into the Second Age. "Hey. You wanna blow this popsicle stand and go get Chinese?" He glances down at his page. Wavers. "We'll just stop by my condo to pick up my book first," I clarify. "I'm reading Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*."

"Yes," he says, placing his whole soul behind that single word.

"Great," I reply, and he follows me to the living room. We retrieve our coats. "Thanks, everyone, see you. Enjoy the holiday."