

10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



NUMBER 11, AUGUST 2023

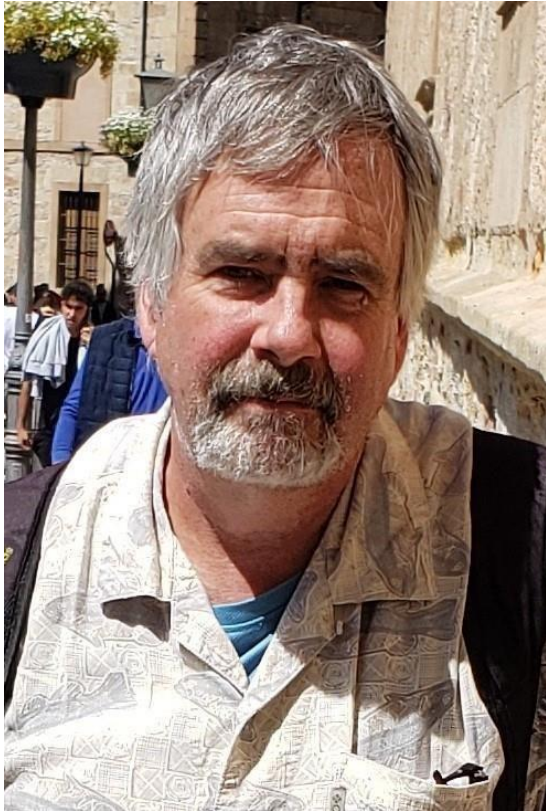
Welcome to Issue #11. This issue features two returning authors, Rob Dinsmoor and Sandra Arnold. Ms. Arnold's story comes to us all the way from New Zealand, while Marcelo Medone sends us his flash piece from Uruguay. You will also enjoy Gene Murphy from Kerry, Ireland and Mark Broucek from London, England. The other authors are from Massachusetts, Arizona, Illinois, New York and two from California. Please sit back in a comfy chair or couch and enjoy the ten excellent writers.

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* published by Cervena Barva Press. He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



Rob Dinsmoor has written dozens of scripts for Nickelodeon and MTV, and his humorous pieces have been published in *American Bystander*, *National Lampoon* and *Paper*. He has published dozens of short stories in various literary magazines, several of which were nominated for Pushcart Prizes. He hails from Bloomington, Indiana and now lives with his rescued dog Jack, a fellow Hoosier. You can visit his Website at www.robertdinsmoor.com. Through his humorous pieces and videos with The Boomer Project, he seeks to explore the issues and experiences that unite us as a unique generation as well as explore the quirks and foibles that define us.”

The Talisman

The boy knew he'd found something that would impress the elders. Its surface reminded him of onyx but instead of being smooth and round, it was more like a flat box. He turned it around and round in his hand, examining it. There was a tiny hold at the bottom and flattened bumps on the two of its sides. Next to it was another black box with a black root coming out of it. After playing around with it, he thought to put the root into one of the holes.

A white spectre appeared from inside the box. At first he thought it was a face but it was the image of an apple. After several seconds, dozens of hieroglyphics appeared. Ten of them looked like the numbers he'd seen in the ancient texts, but below them were other tiny symbols. He hid it under his coyote hide for fear that someone would steal it.

As the dozens of people in the Family were sitting around a fire, the boy raised his hand to show the chief what he had found. Solemnly, the Chief beckoned him over. As he was bringing it over, he noticed that the hieroglyphics had disappeared. He rubbed the talisman furiously, but the chief beckoned him over more insistently and then snatched it from his hand. The Chief also rubbed the talisman and then gripped it tightly as if he intended to crush it. The ghost apple appeared once again, drawing gasps from the family members seated around them.

The Chief explained that he'd once seen the talisman as a child and that his elders had explained its use to him. They said that it was a relic of life before the Great Battle and if you pressed down on the right hieroglyphics, you could speak with anyone in the world. Yet, there was one very special combination that would allow you to speak directly to the Gods. After meditating for several minutes, the chief pushed three of the white hieroglyphics, causing the talisman to beep three times. "Our crops have failed and we are running out of food!" he shouted into the talisman. "Please send help!"

Soon afterward, the numbers and hieroglyphics faded away. Family members joined hands, closed their eyes, and waited



Sandra Arnold lives in New Zealand. She is the author of seven books including *The Bones of the Story*, Impspired Books, UK; *Where the wind blows*, Truth Serum Press, Australia; *The Ash, the Well and the Bluebell*, Mākaro Press, NZ and Aviana Burgas, Bulgaria; *Soul Etchings*, Retreat West Books, UK; and *Sing no Sad Songs*, Canterbury University Press. Her short fiction has been widely published and anthologised and has received nominations for The Best Small Fictions, Best Microfictions and The Pushcart Prize. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Central Queensland University, Australia.

A cut above

‘You remember that shy lass, Ellie, who used to live on my street? The one that married an Officer in the RAF and went to live in Germany? She’s back home now on holiday. I called in to see her mother the other day and she started telling me that Ellie mixes with all the Officers’ wives in Germany. Then in comes Ellie. Speaking so beautiful now.’

‘Hmm. I heard she took elocution lessons over there. People say she’s a bit up herself these days.’

‘She’s moved up in the *world*, not up *herself*.’

‘Never mind Ellie. I’m looking at that barista. Man or woman? Looks like a man with the clothes and haircut, but definitely sporting boobs.’

‘Ah, that’s Troy. They’re non-binary.’

‘Non what?’

‘It means they don’t identify as either male or female.’

‘That makes no sense. And why are you saying ‘they’? I can see only one person.’

‘Troy prefers to be referred to as they and them.’

‘But that’s not grammatical.’

‘It’s what some people prefer these days.’

‘Some people? How many theys and thems are there?’

‘We all need to move with the times.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘See that woman over in the corner? Troy is bringing her two cups of coffee and two cakes.’

‘So?’

‘The woman’s husband died two years ago. When he was alive they always sat at that table and ordered coffee and chocolate cake. Now, every time she comes in here Troy brings her two cups of coffee and two chocolate cakes same as before.’

‘That’s kind of her.’

‘Kind of *them*.’

‘Her! And the husband dead two years? Time she moved on.’

‘Has your husband been dead two years?’

‘Of course not!’

‘So how do you know it’s time she moved on?’

‘You’re so full of it today, aren’t you!’



Anna Hallett lives in the Anza Borrego Desert writing under the blazing sun and shining stars. Her works appeared in 101 Words, Five Minute Lit, Wicked Shadow Press Anthology “Murder on Her Mind,” and Literature Today. She is co-founder and director of The Writing Party, an entertainment company offering a fun environment to explore creativity through writing. She wrote the books *Waiting Games and Amusements for Families* and *The Writing Party Inspirations*.

The Brown Cardboard Box

The brown cardboard box with the smile logo rested on the table in front of Emma. It didn't belong there.

Work had been, as usual, long and boring. Tedious tasks and stupid customers she had to serve as though they were always right. Even when they were so, so wrong. Like that ridiculous old lady with the expired coupons. Her manager let the old bat get away with it again. Some people get all the breaks.

Emma seethed on the way home, slammed her palm on the steering wheel at every red light and cussed out the idiot driver in front of her who kept putting on his brakes even though the road was clear.

A few blocks from home, stopped at a stop sign, she saw the brown box on the doorstep of a two-story yellow house with white shutters. The house looked cozy and spacious at the same time. The kind of house with a mom, dad, and two kids. The kitchen would be fully stocked and the closets stuffed with clothes, shoes, and toys.

There were no cars in the driveway and no neighbors about. The package sat just outside the front door. Emma thought about expired coupons and empty closets as she stopped her car at the curb in front of the stone path that led to the front door of the yellow house. Without urgency, she stepped from the car, walked up the path, removed the package from the front stoop, and brought it back to her car. She drove home.

The label on the box which now sat accusingly on the table said it was for “Janet Hastings.” Emma wanted what Janet had. Emma now had what Janet wanted. Emma looked up as her daughter came out of her room.

Sara walked by, ignored her mother, and went to the kitchen. She opened cupboards that contained canned vegetables and boxes of pasta almost at their expiration date and slammed them shut again. She searched the fridge next, rejected the expired yogurt, mealy apples, and wilted lettuce, and pulled out the open carton of shelf-stable milk. She poured the milk into a plastic cup decorated with a chipped cartoon face of Elmo. She put the carton away and went back to her room, closing the door behind her.

Emma lifted the brown cardboard box from the table and carried it to the coat closet by the front door. She tucked the box into the back corner of the empty closet. Maybe tomorrow she would open it. Maybe she would return it to Janet. She closed the closet door and went to the kitchen to fix dinner. Maybe the box contained kibble for Schrodinger’s cat.



Marcelo Medone (1961, Buenos Aires, Argentina) is a Pushcart Prize nominee fiction writer, poet, essayist, playwright and screenwriter. He received numerous awards and was published in multiple languages in more than 50 countries around the world, including the US. He currently lives in Montevideo, Uruguay. Facebook: Marcelo Medone / Instagram: @marcelomedon

A Green Tomato and an Old Nursery Rhyme

Half an hour after the last explosion, I decided to go out to investigate. The alarm sirens could no longer be heard.

I asked Valeria and Roman to wait for me and began to climb the narrow staircase, helped by my flashlight.

I lifted the door that connected the basement with the rest of the house and suddenly I was flooded with midday sunlight.

What had been the dining room of our house was now a ruined place, with a brutal hole in the roof through which the sunlight and the cold of the harsh winter were pouring in. Little was left standing. I found no traces of bombs or explosives; the missile had probably grazed the roof and fallen somewhere else. Except for the whistling of the wind, the silence was absolute.

I peered into the cellar shaft and saw my wife and my little six-year-old son helpless and frightened.

"Come on up! It's clear", I told them.

We trudged through the rubble. The small treasures of a lifetime were devastated. But the most precious treasure, our lives, were still safe.

Roman rummaged through some pieces of wood and rescued his harmonica. He tried to put it to his lips, but I stopped him.

"Not for now, Roman. Save it for later."

He looked at me with his big brown teary eyes and obeyed me. I hugged him with all my fragile humanity. Valeria joined us. For an instant the universe operated in our favor.

We put on our coats and left the house. Chaos was widespread. Most of the buildings on the block showed damage from the bombing. The small supermarket next door had been hit hard, perhaps by the same bomb that shattered our roof. A group of looters were squeezing through the gaps to take what they could. Although perhaps I should simply call them survivors.

I could now clearly hear the various sounds of the tragedy: intermittent cries, muffled screams, the occasional vehicle driving out of sight.

We met other neighbors, who were equally frightened but safe. We greeted each other with distant gestures.

We returned to our house. In the back garden, the vegetable garden had been buried by debris from the roof. Amidst the shards of shingles and wood, a lone tomato plant stood, with a single tiny, unripe fruit.

Roman approached it, stroked the green tomato and smiled.

"All was not lost," he said. He sat down on a pile of rubble, took out his harmonica and began to play an old nursery rhyme.

I looked up at the clear blue sky and told myself that my son was right.



David Henson and his wife have lived in Brussels and Hong Kong and now reside in Illinois. His work has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes, Best of the Net and Best Small Fictions and has appeared in various journals including Gone Lawn, Moonpark Review, Literally Stories, and Fiction on the Web. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>. His Twitter is @annalou8.

Snow Man

I shower and am sipping a glass of lemonade in the kitchen when I hear a scraping sound. Looking through the window, I'm shocked to see Ned Jansen pushing his shovel down the sidewalk.

I go out and clear my throat as I approach Ned, but he doesn't hear me over the grit of metal on concrete. I position myself so he can see me out of the corner of his eye. For all I know, he's drunk, sleepwalking or having some kind of mental episode, and I don't want to startle him.

When Ned notices me, he leans on his shovel and smiles. Sweat drips from his chin; his tee shirt clings to his skin. "Good morning, Paul," he says. "It really came down last night, didn't it?"

His voice is normal. His eyes look clear. "What are you doing, Ned?"

He chuckles. "Clearing your sidewalk as always."

"Ned, I don't understand. It's ..." How do I say this so I don't freak him out? "Take a deep breath and tell me what you smell."

He inhales. "Kind of like hay."

"That's fresh-cut grass."

"So?"

I happen to notice a small blue egg that's fallen to the ground. I pick up the broken shell, and a tiny glob of yellow with a bit of blood runs onto my palm.

"Cut grass. A robin egg. Do you understand?"

"Not sure what you're getting at, Paul." He stretches his back and groans.

"I'm getting too old for this. Need to retire."

"You did, Ned. A couple years ago."

He clunks the shovel on the sidewalk as if knocking clumped snow loose, then starts pushing his shovel again. "No time for chit chat. Got six more to dig out after you."

I grab his elbow, maybe a little more roughly than I intended.

"Hey! Careful, Paul. That's my money arm." He mops his forehead with a hanky.

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Ned, why don't you take a break. Let me phone someone."

He stares question marks at me.

I seem to recall him mentioning a daughter and ask if she's still living in town.

“Sally? What could you possibly want with her?”

After I coax him a little, Ned gives me Sally's number. I call and explain what's happening with her father. I can hear the torment in her voice as she tells me how her father has gone downhill since her mother died.

A short time later, Sally and her husband, who introduces himself as Pete, arrive. Ned insists on finishing my driveway before leaving. His daughter chokes back tears and wonders aloud what they're going to do with him.

When Ned's finished, he puts his shovel in the back of his truck, and, after some resistance, gives Pete the keys.

Ned starts to get in Sally's car then twists toward me. “Don't worry, Paul,” he says. “You can count on me next time it snows.” I can practically see his breath as he speaks.



Frank C. Modica is a retired teacher who taught children with special needs for over 34 years. His work has appeared in *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, *Frost Meadow Review*, *Green Ink Poetry*, *Blue Mountain Review* and *Raconteur Review*. Frank's first chapbook, *What We Harvest*, nominated for an Eric Hoffer book

award, was published in the fall Of 2021 by Kelsay Books. His second chapbook, *Old Friends*, was published in December 2022 by Cyberwit Press.

Lights

The flashing neon Marquee always draws my brother and me in for the weekend matinee. After Mike and I bypass the crowded refreshment stand, we enter the darkened movie auditorium, where the lights stay off except for the occasional fundraiser, when ushers pass buckets for the March of Dimes and wise guys flip flattened popcorn boxes helter-skelter through the air.

One Saturday the lights snap on before the show. Instead of ushers, burly blueclad cops with flashlights scan the rows of kids, searching for something. We sit, afraid and uncertain. Older kids ask, “What’s going on?” but the cops won’t answer. They leave after a few minutes, the theater darkens, and the previews begin. Hours later, still shaken, we trek home under the watchful eye of the neighborhood streetlights, popcorn money still jingling in our pockets.

When we open the front door to our little duplex Mom and Dad hold us tight in the glare of the living room ceiling light. They know something we don't know; a news story about the police looking for a neighborhood kid—it could have been a kidnapping, it could have been one of us.



Gary Fincke's new collection of flash fiction *The Corridors of Longing* was published by Pelekinesis Press in 2022. The title story was reprinted in *Best Small Fiction 2020*. He is co-editor of the annual anthology *Best Microfiction*.

Maneuvers

After the war, the sons of veterans believed maneuvers mattered. They loved war games like the one they named Operation Orchard. The one that repeated itself for a week of summer nights. The one when the son of a man who did not serve crouched among the wild cherry trees and squinted, ashamed to wear his glasses, until he was shot by flashlight beam or worse, his throat was slit by the rubber knife of a clear-sighted friend.

In the winter, the veterans' sons were commandos with snowballs packed hard and hurtful. They rode sleds in the dark to attack each other. One cloudy night, that son of a father who had not fought was, as usual, declared his friends' enemy and given a minute's head start. He slapped himself down on his American Flyer, swiveling a downhill miracle through the orchard until he hammered a stump. Head-on, he struck it, enough loft to earn a two-foot shear of jacket and skin instead of paralysis. He rose like the men in war films who murmur, "It's only a flesh wound," amazed by the precise location of escape.

Because his friends overshot his location, expecting his sled and footprints at the bottom of the hill, he put aside the astonishment of the crash site and set off, behind them, for the booted journey home where his father would be watching television until ten o'clock. The boy thought of taking off his coat to sit beside his father, waiting for him to notice the evidence of his luck, the wide but shallow jacket wound. His father, with his one deaf ear, had returned home safely from the draft's exam, but the boy, a volunteer, was keeping his weakness secret. He crept to his room, his good fortune private, earned in basic training.



JD Clapp is based in San Diego, CA. His work has appeared in *101Words*, *Micro Fiction Mondays Magazine*, *Free Flash Fiction*, *Wrong Turn Literary*, *Scribes MICRO*, *Café Lit*, and *Sporting Classics Magazine* among several others. His story, *One Last Drop*, was a finalist in the 2023 Hemingway Shorts Literary Journal, Short Story Competition.

Room Service the Morning After

Parker woke up, head spinning. Somebody was pounding on the door. He looked across the bed at the alarm clock—6:00 a.m.

“Room Service!” a Caribbean sounding voice bellowed in between the pounding.

“Be right there,” Parker yelled, grabbing his pants from the side of the bed. Seeing the affable man in a hotel uniform and a cart loaded with food, he said, “I think there must be a mistake. I didn’t order room service.”

The waiter looked perplexed. “Ah, well sir, here is the order form you left on your door last night,” he said handing Parker the door hanger menu.

Bleary eyed, Parker looked. “Damn,” he thought, now vaguely remembering thinking he would be starving in the morning after an afternoon and long night of drinking when he filled the evil little door hanger out.

“Ah, yes...bring it in,” he said. The waiter wheeled
the cart in.

“Sir, I am going to leave the cart since there is so much here. How many silverware settings do you need?” he asked. “Two please. My wife is down at the gym.” “Only two? He asked.

“Yes. My wife likes to over order so she can sample things,” he said, happy to have somebody 2000 miles away to throw under the bus for this expensive debacle.

The waiter nodded, then walked him through the feast. “Here is the loaded omelet, sausage, and toast. The pancakes with bacon and fresh fruit are here. And the two-egg breakfast with grits, ribeye, and English muffin are in this one. I have coffee and juice for four,” he explained. Parker checked the 22% tip box, handed him another \$10, signed the bill, and sent the very confused and happy room service attendant on his way.

Still drunk, Parker ate some toast, part of the omelet, gulped down some juice, and poured a coffee. Not wanting to waste everything, Parker opened the mini fridge to stash the perishables, and saw a small set of neon green button eyes sewn onto a little sack cloth figure, with feathers for hair and XXX sewn where a mouth should be stared back at him.

“What the...” he said out loud, before remembering, yesterday, he had ventured into a back-alley voodoo shop to buy a “real” voodoo doll. “Jesus, New Orleans is worse than Vegas,” he thought. Parker threw the doll on the bed and stored the food.

Thank God I don't have a meeting until lunch, he thought.

He was about to climb back into bed when he got a text from his boss's assistant:
Tom had a motorcycle accident this morning. He shattered his leg and needs surgery. We need you back in the home office tomorrow.

As that sunk into his alcohol-muddled brain, Parker felt growing anxiety. With a sudden realization, anxiety gave way to panic. He grew ashen. Parker didn't pay for the voodoo doll, he paid for a curse.



Gene Murphy is a writer from Co. Kerry, Ireland. His short stories and poems have appeared in publications in Ireland, the UK and the US, including *Sonder*, *The Galway Review*, *The Places*, *The Martello Journal*, *The Things Unsaid* and *The Honest Ulsterman*. Gene, who has undertaken writing courses with the Irish Writers Centre, also completed his first novel in 2022.

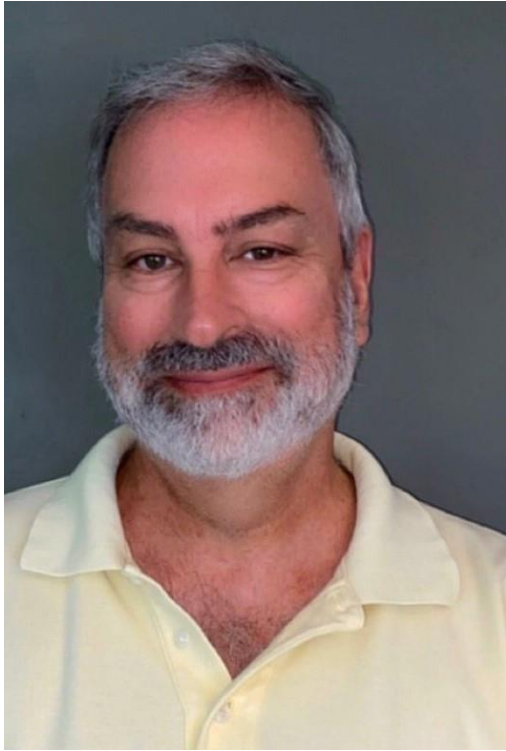
An Accident Waiting to Happen

It was a Wednesday morning in December and I was making my way home from a gym session, twisting my feet on the slick concrete path to test the grip of my trainers, when the Fiat Punto with only one headlight hit the little schoolboy who had stepped out from behind a parked car, sending him spinning through the dark above like a toy windmill caught in a gale.

As the world closed its eyes and covered its ears, I felt something hit my leg. I initially couldn't see anything in front of me on the path, but with the aid of my phone flashlight I discovered the object lying near a wall. It was one of the boy's shoes.

I picked it up and held it in the length of my open hand. The bowed laces were pulled so tight I figured an adult must have knotted them. Its inside was still warm, too, though at the time I wasn't sure why I had put my hand in. Maybe I couldn't believe its tiny size, its delicateness.

The strange thing about the shoe was its grip. So smooth was its sole that the boy must have run a thousand marathons during his short time on this earth. Studying the sole, I thought what a silly thing it was for his parents to send their little boy out alone on such a slippery morning with zero grip on his shoes. It seemed like an irresponsible thing to do considering the dangers. He could have slipped on black ice and injured an elbow, after all. Yes, I thought they were very irresponsible parents indeed. But then again, I suppose they were waiting for the January sales.



Mark Broucek started writing in earnest during lockdown in London, where you were only allowed out of your flat for one hour per day. To keep from watching 23 hours of Netflix daily, he got some ideas onto his iPad. Returning to the States, he has continued writing, though not as feverishly. If an idea keeps him up at night, he knows it's something he needs to write out. It's better than insomnia.

Polonius' Last Stand

“To thine own self be true-”

Polonius was just about finished with his nightly litany of advice to Laertes when a man entered the scene stage left and ruined his monologue. Judging by the interlopers early 21st, rather than late 16th, century attire, Polonius had a pretty good idea of what was going on. He was being served. But, as the saying went, the show must go on ...

“Are you Samuel G. Beltran?” the man asked. When he had logged onto his Fulham County webpage this morning and had seen that this Beltran character had evaded numerous process servers over the last month, he welcomed the challenge. But this was a new one.

Beltran figured that if he could just prolong the scene long enough and get this guy booted off the stage, he stood a chance of evading his (soon to be ex) wife's

lawyers. “Who is this Beltran of which you speak?” he thundered. “I am Polonius, chief minister to Claudius.” He gestured to the sullen teenager sitting at his feet. “And this is my son, Laertes.”

“Laertes”, who was carrying beneath his tunic, glanced up at the man (who looked like a narc), said “I’m outta here” and slouched offstage as quickly as a semi-stoned teenager could. *Cretin*, thought Beltran, *I guess I’m on my own. As I like it. To the man*: “What is this manner of dress you employ?” The audience tittered nervously. Emboldened by their reaction, he continued, “And what be this parchment you wave?” More laughter. When the man froze for a moment, Beltran thought, I’ve got him.

But the man was Fulham County’s Finest for a reason. He was always prepared. “This be a summons for your dalliances with the Merry Wives of Windsor,” he said. The audience guffawed. Beltran sagged briefly but, being the professional that he was, rallied. “We are not in Windsor, but in Denmark, kind sir,” he said. Your move, he thought. And move, the man did.

“Well, something sure smells rotten here,” he said. The audience whooped. The man went in for the kill. “And, I might add, you’re an adulterate beast.”

Beltran just stared at him. Who is this guy?, he thought. Barely two scenes later, as the Ghost (for, as usual in Shakespearian plays, actors played numerous roles), Beltran would utter those exact words. Beltran may not have been the best actor around but he could always read the room. Time to end this. “Yes, I’m Samuel Beltran,” he said.

As the man stepped forward to hand him the papers, the stage manager pulled a wire and the curtain came down on Hamlet and Beltran’s career.