

10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



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Welcome to Issue #13. Unique stories highlight this issue with, as usual, ten writers whose flash fiction will elicit different emotions from sadness to humor. Their stories show individual style and creativity. I tend to select stories which entertain me and hope you will find them the same. So enjoy the ten excellent stories written by ten excellent writers as you relax in a comfortable chair.

Happy Holidays to everyone!

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 and a full volume flash fiction book, *Secret Behind The Gate*, (Cervena Barva Press). He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



Gary Fincke's flash collection *The Corridors of Longing* was published in 2022 by Pelekinesis Press. His newest book is *The Mayan Syndrome*, a memoir-in-essays (Madhat press, 2023). He is co-editor of the annual anthology *Best Microfiction*.

The Long Line for Brains

In the town where I live, at its annual fair, the longest line leads to my father's brain sandwiches, pigs' this year, because mad cow rumors scared off customers last summer. I'm twenty-one, my tenth year of helping. I've moved from doing condiments to fixing whole sandwiches to working his old-fashioned cash register, an attraction on its own for kids, especially the bell that sounds when I ring up a sale. Mostly, now, I do all three because it's just me and him spending a weekend away from the empty house.

The kids, of course, never try a sandwich. Not until they're twelve or thirteen and taking a bite on a dare from their friends. Winning a bet, maybe. Pocketing enough to buy a sandwich at a different booth. I was eleven when I ate one. Dad said I couldn't work until I did. He'd trained me for years on liver and hearts at Thanksgiving, stomach and tongue a part of my mother's handed-down recipes. What I liked best were kidneys, the veal and lamb ones, fantastic once the piss smell fried itself away. None of them, though, was like biting into brains. The getting past the idea.

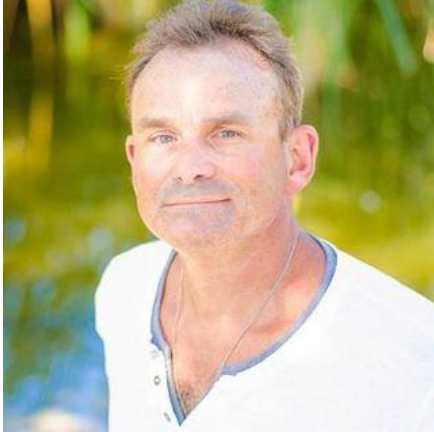
A week of cholesterol on one bun, my mother, four years dead now, always pointed out, as if that were the source of anyone's hesitation. On the short list of condiments, onions are most popular, jalapenos lately gaining traction, the sliced

tomatoes, my mother's idea, ordered almost exclusively by women. My father, six years ago, added a whole wheat option for the health conscious. My mother laughed and said, "Work on a vegan version."

"Not like the old days," says someone every twenty minutes. They mean the absence of beef, a hint of epidemic in the air. My father says those who find pleasure in brains, despite the long line, are thinning. Look at their faces, he says. Soon, they will be aging out. At a nearby booth, a man offers meatless burgers. At another there is nothing but my mother's fantasy, vegetables cooked with a cashew concoction masquerading as cheese.

Here is the secret that I've learned. Why, unlike my father, I have confidence in this business—he can raise the price. Not by nickels and dimes, but by dollars. People will pay, my father's sandwiches expensive but popular because something soon going extinct seems more valuable to those who once took it for granted.

Like the large mammals. Even the dangerous ones are lovable now. The ones who would eat you if they could, without hesitation swallowing your brain. The ones people will pay a fortune to see just before they vanish.



Kirby Michael Wright was born and raised in Hawaii. He was a guest lecturer at Trinity College Dublin.

Babyland

Angie felt barren watching kids swarm the ice cream truck. Would an egg ever get fertilized? The boys and girls took her back to her childhood home a grove away from Disneyland. She'd adored her surgeon father, stay-at-home mom, and their sprawling ranch house overlooking acres of oranges and Sleeping Beauty Castle.

Angie tagged along on Rob's pub-crawls and sipped coffee lattes with Jessica, her old roomy. She confessed to Jessica she ached for a baby but money was an issue. She worked part-time at UCSD and hubby's floor hours had been cut way back. Thankfully, her parents filled in the gaps. She'd been engaged to Rob long before he went bald and just discovered his moustache hid a harelip scar. This made her think he was sneaky and might prove unfaithful down the road. She reassured herself by focusing on flaws. Rob was chubby. His squinty eyes reminded her of slits. "Not in my league," she whispered, remembering she'd posed for lingerie ads back in college and wore a wet t-shirt in *Girls Gone Wild*.

Angie hid the rubbers. She stocked up on energy vitamins and filled the Netflix queue with hot movies. After an August of steamy passion, BABYLAND never came. She blamed it on Rob being obese and wondered if fat reduced sperm production. But, after a wild and crazy New Year's in Kona, a baby bump appeared. Angie had a boy. A month passed and she conceived again. She gave birth to their second boy after laboring most of Super Bowl Sunday. Rob wanted their sons' names to honor Hank Aaron and Joe Montana. Angie agreed halfheartedly. Sometimes she called Aaron "Hank" and Montana "Joe." She quit UCSD and became a stay-at-home mom.

* * *

Now Aaron and Montana attend a private junior high. Angie has a ranch home with a pool and her husband practically runs the dealership. She knows she should be grateful but still feels empty. She fills the void by training obsessively for 5Ks, 10Ks, and marathons. She resents Rob whenever he joins her for a jaunt. She hates his clumsy strides, piggish grunts, and BO. She always tells Rob she needs to work on her time before leaving him in the dust. The farther behind he falls, the stronger she feels.

A conch shell blows the start of the Coronado Marathon. The ocean breeze makes Angie feel free. She knows her family will be waiting at the finish. Another personal best? Perhaps. For now, twenty-six miles is the goal. She wonders if running is an escape valve. She feels distant, as if some hag is Rob's real wife and her sons belong to another woman. She wants to break the tape and keep going, to run as far away as her body takes her. Angie looks down. She's certain her breasts are sagging. Those bumps could signal love handles. She picks up the pace, watching her bronze legs grind the asphalt.



Mikki Aronoff's work appears in *New World Writing*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Tiny Molecules*, *HAD*, *Bending Genres*, *Milk Candy Review*, *Gone Lawn*, *Mslexia*, *The Dribble Drabble Review*, *100 word story*, *10 x 10 Flash Fiction*, *The Citron Review*, *Atlas and Alice*, *trampset*, *jmww*, *The Offing* and elsewhere. She has received Pushcart, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, Best American Short Stories, and Best Microfiction nominations.

Green-Eyed

The streetlights have flickered on, and your kitchen gets cozier with each shade of grey that washes over our landscaped suburban cul-de-sac. Beeswax candles cast patterns through the lace hem of your antique tablecloth onto your spick-and-span oak floor. The ceramic teeth on the chipmunk cookie jar sparkle satisfaction. The cheerful clutter of your home charms and beguiles. I shiver recalling the chill of the polished concrete floors at home, pull my sweater tighter.

I'm fixed on the rack of commemorative state spoons on your wall — travel tokens forged, stamped, and sold to tourists to boast where they've been, whether they've had a good time, or not. American heritage on display, hanging by your pantry next to Currier & Ives prints of skaters in winter. You and your man have slept in a queen-sized bed in a B&B in every state. Fifty polished spoons stand erect as testament.

I pout. I've only been to the east coast, the west coast, and here. I grumble to you, not for the first time, that my house screams *sleek*, proclaims *cold*. It smells of bruschetta when I want to inhale cinnamon. You tilt your head, knit your eyebrows and squeeze my hand. *But I've always wanted jade eyes like yours.*

You tell me last night you dreamed you came to a cocktail party at my house, that it was suffused with the garlic of tapas. Bottles of Rioja sparkled like starshine on the granite kitchen island. The Jura steamed espressos non-stop. You'd felt so out of place.

We scrape our chairs back from the maple table in unison to clear our chipped Wedgewood teacups before a sportscar slips home over the driveway at my house next door, a station wagon

at yours. We smile at each other and wrinkle our noses. *Husbands*, we chortle, reaching for our lipsticks.

Your chestnut eyes crinkle at me as you reach for my coat. *Remember the day you moved in? I didn't think we'd be such good friends.* You tuck two sugar cookies into a checkered cloth napkin for me to take home. As your fingertips guide my back through the front door, mine twitch and dance a question that's been nagging me all afternoon: which would be less conspicuous — a space where *Ohio* should be, or the whole rack gone missing?



Amy Grech has sold over 100 stories to various anthologies and magazines including: *A New York State of Fright*, *Apex Magazine*, *Even in the Grave*, *Gorefest*, *Hell's Heart*, *Hell's Highway*, *Hell's Mall*, *Microverses*, *Punk Noir Magazine*, *Roi Fainéant Press*, *Tales from the Canyons of the Damned*, *Yellow Mama*, and many others. Alien Buddha Press published her poetry chapbook, *A Shadow of Your Former Self*. She is an Active Member of the Horror Writers Association and the International Thriller Writers who lives in Forest Hills, Queens. You can connect with Amy on X: https://twitter.com/amy_grech or visit her website: <https://www.crimsonscreeams.com>.

Bum's Rush

On the way home from Barrow's Intense in Brooklyn, a 51-year-old author makes the trek back to Forest Hills, which takes over an hour by subway, due to never-ending construction. She had two ciders while catching up with fellow authors, reminding them of the launch party for her new poetry chapbook the following week.

The woman absently scratches the raw crater roughly the size of a quarter, just below her left ear. She got caught in Brooklyn gang crossfire a few years ago—a bullet ricocheted off her left cheek—a glancing blow that resulted in an unsightly crater roughly the size of a quarter—an unwelcome war wound. She got her NYC concealed carry permit shortly thereafter and has been armed ever since.

Exiting the train at 75th Avenue, a deserted station just after 11:00 pm ascending the stairs, without giving it much thought, unzips her black bag, emblazoned with MARC JACOBS NEW YORK in gold lettering, anxious to rid her hands of repulsive train crud, grabs a Purell wipe. The bag, an impulse-buy at Nordstrom Rack winds up being a vagrant magnet. The homeless *know* it's expensive. Intricate stitching with faux gold zippers is a dead giveaway. Vigilant,

she rebuffs their unwelcome advances with a stone-cold stare that conveys disgust.

The woman grits her teeth when she spies a 40-something ruddy-cheeked man with a pasty complexion wearing a camouflage jacket, black pants, and matching shoes lurking near the exit. A native New Yorker, she knows that means trouble. He immediately approaches, eager for what he mistakes as a handout. “Hey, goodnight...hey goodnight,” he squawks urgently, like a demented parrot, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

She ignores his cryptic chant, reaches into her bag again, snatches something, then lets it dangle from her right shoulder. The man takes the bait, lunging, but falls short. “Don’t fuck with me,” he snarls, his hot breath whiskey sour in her ear.

“I’m just getting started,” she scoffs, wielding a hot pink, Concealed Carry Glock 26 9mm, she picked up for a steal online that she affectionately calls Vicious Pink. The pink compact gun is a stark contrast to her subdued black leather bag. Recalling her training, she effortlessly leans into a shooting stance, exhales, and caresses the trigger with her right index finger before squeezing off a shot. The man staggers, backing himself into a corner, littered with empty bottles and greasy, crumpled fast food wrappers flush with cool, white subway tile. His bloodshot eyes widen, a mishmash of shock and awe as the bullet pierces the man’s right kneecap—a glancing blow. His leg buckles and he slumps, clutching his ruined knee *with the rest of the trash*.

“*Bum’s rush,*” she chuckles, *smirking and* tucks Vicious Pink back into her bag for safekeeping.



Karen Cline-Tardiff has been writing as long as she could hold a pen. Her works have appeared in several anthologies and journals, both online and in print. She is founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Gnashing Teeth Publishing*. Find her at karenthepoet.com.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Growing up, don't ask don't tell meant something completely different.

Don't ask. Don't ask questions. Don't question authority. Don't get in adult business. If you don't ask questions, then no one will be forced to lie.

Don't tell. Don't tell anyone what happens in the family. Don't tell anyone when Dad passes out drunk in the back den. Don't tell anyone when Mom throws another bottle of Oil of Olay through the wall, narrowly missing Dad's head. Just. Don't. Say. Anything.

The car has always been a little more raucous. Perhaps that is why I wasn't allowed to drive until I was 18: fear of the freedom afforded by a moving vehicle, a place where secrets sometimes came out. The first place I learned my mother didn't know what oral sex was. At 30, I thought that explained a lot. I didn't even know.

Driving to the grocery store we drive by the first house my parents lived in. I smile and remark *it's sad to see they cut down the trees Dad planted*. My mother harumphs. *It could burn down as far as I'm concerned*. A crack forms in the dam. Courtship, eloping, regret. They all come spilling out. Tears. Disbelief. That explains a lot.

Lying in bed in the next room, the door open between us to share the heat from the gas stove, I hear my mother snoring. Sometimes she wakes. *Are you awake?* I'm always awake in this house. *They said on TV today that loneliness is 18 times worse than smoking*. Don't ask. Don't ask why she still cloisters herself in this monument to a life poorly spent.

Franklin Graham is on the television in the kitchen. He's trying to save the unsaved on a 60 second daytime commercial. *I thank God every day for everything I have.* Don't tell God about all the things he didn't give you, all the ways His religion forced you to stay when you knew you should go.

Today we wait for the home health nurse to come. It's now my job to hide any semblance of a human living in this house. Remotes for the TV tucked into a drawer. Nothing on the fridge. No dishes in the sink. Nothing on the kitchen table except the pill bottles to be sorted into a pill organizer. And us, sitting expectantly, hiding the book full of every-other-hour blood pressure checks, despite being told *you're just increasing your anxiety.* I've been warned to not tell. *It's none of their business.*

Tomorrow, I go home. I will be awake laying next to my husband while he snores. I won't pick up the phone and ask how she's doing. She won't tell me anyway.



Kevin M. Folliard is a Chicagoland writer whose fiction has been collected by *The Horror Tree*, *The Dread Machine*, *Demain Publishing*, *Dark Owl Publishing* and more. His recent publications include his NEW horror anthology *The Misery King's Country*, his YA fantasy adventure novel *Grayson North: Frost-Keeper of the Windy City*, and his 2022 dinosaur adventure novel *Carnivore Keepers*. Kevin currently resides in the western suburbs of Chicago, IL, where he enjoys his day job in academia and membership in the La Grange Writers Group.

Greener Pastures

“Nothing will ever be the same again, but everything will be fine,” I told my 12-year-old niece Gina. Her father, my brother, had died that week.

Those were the words my grandma said to us when our mom died. And so far, more or less, I’d found her words to be true. So when I saw Gina—slumped on the back porch steps, knees scrunched against her chest, tears running down her face—Grandma’s words resurfaced. In that moment, the words seemed golden on my tongue. I felt sad, but wise.

Disappointment twisted Gina’s face. “That’s stupid, Uncle Jason! This will *never* be fine!”

Give it time, I almost said. But what a cliché that would have been. *Time heals all wounds, my ass*, would be more honest. Grandma’s words soured. “Sorry,” I said. “You’re right.”

Gina brushed her hair back and wiped her eyes on her sleeves.

Green grass whickered in the breeze. A few houses down, the neighbor’s dog barked.

“Your dad loved his lawn,” I said. “When he and your mom first bought this house, this backyard was a shithole, pardon my French. Weeds everywhere. Piles of rotted wood behind the garage. Huge patches of dirt that turned into hog slop pits of mud when it rained.

“Ticks and mites and all kinds of critters were building little societies back there between tall stalks of grass. This ancient fence was half collapsed.

“Your dad rolled up his sleeves and toiled here, a few hours each night, and on the weekends. Within a couple months, he transformed this yard into his square of perfection. His pride and joy. The Landscaping Nazi, I called him, because he wouldn’t let me bring my dog over.”

“He hated dogs,” she whispered. “Maybe I can get a dog now.”

“Maybe. If it’s okay with your mom.” I squeezed her hand. “My point is, if he loved this lawn that much, think about how much he loved you, and how much he’s going to need you to be okay. You are his true pride and joy.”

Her eyes widened.

“The pain won’t go away. You’re right. But you will be fine. Pain is okay. We’ve all got it. And we’ll all be fine.”

Gina leaned against me for a minute. The dog kept barking. I made up my mind to convince Gina’s mom, my sister-in-law, to let her have her dog. I’d get the dog, buy everything they needed, pledge to dog sit anytime.

Gina suddenly stood and walked down the steps, toward the garage.

“Where are you off to, sweetheart?”

She nodded at the grass. “The lawn’s looking a little shaggy. Want to help me start the mower?”



Marie Anderson is a Chicago area married mother of three millennials. Her work has appeared in about 70 publications, most recently in *Calliope Interactive*, *Shotgun Honey*, *On the Premises*, *Muleskinner Journal*, and forthcoming in *Coffin Bell* and *Bethlehem Woods Roundtable Magazine*. Since 2009, she has led and learned so much good stuff from a writing critique group at a public library in La Grange, IL.

Bonding

I knew I shouldn't have gone into the delivery room.

"This is how you'll bond," the midwife had assured me. "Trust me. At the end of the day, you'll be glad you saw new life flash and flame into this gloriously goofy world of ours. After all, you're partly responsible."

"Half responsible," I corrected, silently flagging the curly-haired, rosy-cheeked midwife as a bad poet and a badder man-disrespecter.

The midwife rolled her big brown eyes. "Don't flatter yourself, buster. Now get yourself in there."

Despite my gut gurgling, "GET AWAY!" I straightened my shoulders, lifted my chin, and marched manfully into the delivery room.

Egads! Was that a beach ball inflating the belly of my beloved?

"How's it going, honey?" I called from a safe distance just inside the doorway.

"Four centimeters!" my beloved groaned. "Eighty percent effaced!" she gasped.

"You can do it!" my mouth cheered while my thoughts grumped. Babies are, well, they're not for me. Give me a potty-trained human who can hold a conversation, play tennis and handball, dress themselves. I'll teach my kid to drive, give them the sex talk, walk a daughter up the aisle, teach a son to play poker, craps, and blackjack. Teach a daughter, too, of course. I'm up for being a dad to a walking,

talking, sporty, smart kid. But babies? Not for me. Birthing and babies belong to the mom. That's why God made moms maternal.

"Six centimeters!" the midwife pronounced. "Ninety percent effaced!"

"You can do it, darling!" my mouth cheered.

Sixty more minutes and four more centimeters later, my voice was raw from assuring my beloved that she could do it, my legs were weak from standing so long, my body was sweating from tension and the overly warm room. But then a wet, pink blob gushed out. Of me. From the depths of my jumpy belly, out my exhausted throat, and onto the white rubbery floor.

"What's happening?" my beloved asked.

"Dad lost his cookies!" the midwife said. "And here comes your little cupcake!"

And before I could correct that it wasn't cookies I lost (I don't eat sweets), a slick little blob was placed on my wife's chest, mewling like a kitten, with a shocking head of black hair (my color!), and ten tiny toes and ten tiny fingers and . . . and . . . my forefinger touched the little thing's cheek, so soft, so real, so damn cute, and hot tears gushed out my eyes like my body had struck oil and couldn't hold it back, and, oh lord, oh lord . . .

I knew I shouldn't have gone into the delivery room.



Leigh-Anne Burley has published works in nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. She enjoys family, walking, reading, writing, knitting, and movies. The following are two of her published stories: "Unpredictable Weather Patterns" published by Little Blue Marble "Mr. Mouse and Mr. Clarkes Unite in The Universe" published by Spaceports and Spidersilk.

Captivated by Love

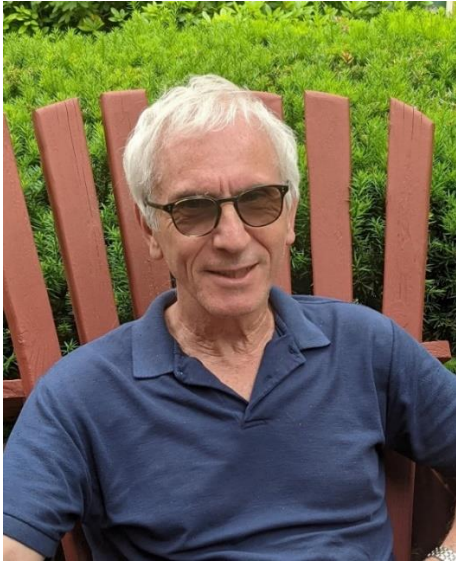
Even though she's left him for good, Mark rests his lanky frame on a still-wet park bench after a spring storm, longing to be with his ex-wife Anne. He desires to confess his love for her and remind her of her importance. Still, he understands that it's not true. The young man realizes his love for Anne resembles his previous romantic relationships, blossoming in the refreshing spring rain and withering away in the relentless summer heat.

Mark has a vivid memory of the first time he met Anne during a pastoral visit to her home following her father's heart attack. Her beauty held him spellbound. Afterward, he was relieved to shut himself in his office to focus on the discipline of writing the following sermon titled "Guard Your Heart."

The couple went on their honeymoon to Paris and experienced years of passionate love. Anne's love freed Mark from his lonely life. The cold cogs of daily obligations slipped into their familiar gears of daily commitments, pin-pricking holes in the idealistic pastor's inflated love balloon. Their life went on like a train on a schedule with cars filled with sawdust while Mark views his wife's charms melding with the other ordinary women in his congregation. He resents Anne's heroic efforts to shore up their limp marriage. The note on the kitchen table read, "Mark, you love the idea of love but don't know how to love. I was naïve not to know the difference."

The following day, he composed his sermon entitled "The Obligations of a Christian" and took solace in the dependable patterns of his established rituals.

A worn-out man finds respite on a park bench, anticipating the spark of love as a captivating woman approaches. Resting his weary eyes on the muddy river, he wonders if she will release him from his confinement and let him soar. Mark stands up and approaches her, yearning for a fresh start.



Gerald Yelle's books include *The Holyoke Diaries*, *Mark My Word and the New World Order* and *Dreaming Alone and with Others*. He has chapbooks: *No Place I Would Rather Be*, *A Box of Rooms* and *Industries Built on Words*. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts and is a member of the Florence Poets Society.

Crickets

At first we thought they were plotting against us, but when nothing happened we thought maybe they were feuding among themselves. Now we're not so sure. They may have been plotting for centuries, working out a plan, waiting for the perfect moment. They don't like what we've done to their habitat and soon they'll be ready to strike. Maybe they're evolving poison stingers. Maybe they'll come disguised as drones. Some of us will be glad to see them do it, thinking we're so out of control we need to be stopped. We swing to the left then swing to the right, and we swing so far we go over the top. Crows have been complaining for decades, saying we upset life in the canopy with all that high swinging. Cows too cry the blues over what we do. But nobody worries. Crows we keep an eye on, and cows, they can complain all they want as long as they stay put, whereas crickets pretty much stay out of sight. Some of us think they're aliens. Scientists say that's nonsense, but politicians think maybe not. They love it when science makes mistakes. All they have to do is threaten to cut off funding and the scientists are right where the politicians want them. A group a few years ago came up with a plan to climb trees and study cicadas in their natural habitat. Politicians refused to pay, so the scientists did it for nothing. They found that when they got up close and made recordings then played them back at slower speeds, cicadas no longer buzzed. It sounded like clicking, like the clicking of crickets when you play their chirping back at slower speeds, or the clicking humans sometimes incorporate

into certain sentences. That's how we know they evolved right here, on earth, just like the rest of us.



Cindy Rosmus originally hails from the Ironbound section of Newark, NJ, once voted the “unfriendliest city on the planet.” She talks like Anybodys from *West Side Story* and everybody from *Saturday Night Fever*. Her noir/horror/bizarro stories have been published in places like *Shotgun Honey*, *Megazine*, *Dark Dossier*, *Danse Macabre*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *Under the Bleachers* and *Rock and a Hard Place*. She is the editor/art director of *Yellow Mama* and has published seven collections of short stories. Cindy is a Gemini, a Christian and an animal rights advocate.

Hasidic Minnie

My name is Domenica, but people call me “Minnie.”

In Italian, *Domenica* means “Sunday.” My least favorite day. Sundays meant Mass, fidgeting in a hard pew, bored. And later, family dinners. Thick, meaty gravy over rigatoni. Or spaghetti. Didn’t it all taste the same?

I hated the family, too. My fat, nosy sisters. “Who was that boy?” Mariana demanded. “I’m telling Papa!” “He’ll kill you,” Teresa said.

And Mama, who made me start school a year late, so she wouldn't be alone. But back in the 1920s, nobody cared.

"Aren't you glad?" she'd say, when it rained. "Wouldn't you rather be here, nice and dry?" In the window, I sat, mournfully, as huge raindrops beat down on the sidewalks. A year behind, I was, feeling like a dunce.

Lightning flashed. Before thunder even struck, Mama squealed. Dropping her sewing, she ran into the closet.

I hated sewing, too. At home, we didn't use machines. My fingers shook. Needles pricked them so . . . "Minnie!" Papa yelled. "You must be more careful. There's blood all over that shirt."

Papa, who I hated the most. With his big garment business; those factories. Poor girls with bleeding fingers. Machines drew more blood.

If he knew about me and Stu Salow, Papa would kill me.

Stu, with his curly black hair, and pale blue eyes, like Rory Calhoun. Stu had the gentlest touch . . .

"Stu the Jew!," Papa would call him.

This special task, Papa had for me, his daughter . . .

"Go down to Market Street." Smiling, he handed me cash. Like this was a treat for me. "And check out the prices."

Of fabric. Hagglng, he meant, with the Orthodox Jewish merchants. The *Hasids*.

"That much?" I said, even though rayon would cost more. "Are you crazy? What about cotton?"

The merchant looked ready to explode. "You're crazy," he said, "You expect to pay less?"

Around us, the streets were bustling. The sun beating down on people with better things to do, maybe fun places to go. Except for the soldiers, headed overseas. To fight that monster . . .

Who would gas this poor merchant. With his curly sideburns, and *yarmulke*.

Stu Salow was over there already. With his spirit of adventure.

"Want a ride?" He patted the seat of his motorcycle.

"Papa will kill you," I pictured Mama saying. "What if you fall off? Crack your skull?"

What if I don't?, I thought.

“I need to go over,” Stu told me, his last night. “People are dying, in camps. My little cousins.” Unlike me, he loved his family. “Imagine, gassing a three-year-old! With his crippled grandma.” He wiped my tears as I couldn’t stop crying.

That night, I risked more than my skull cracking.

I couldn’t take it, anymore. Mama, Papa, those bloody fingers. And no pay, ever!

Smiling, I left Market Street. Emptyhanded. “The price will be the same!” the merchant yelled after me. “Tomorrow!”

Tomorrow was years ago.

Papa couldn’t kill me.

Because he never saw me again.