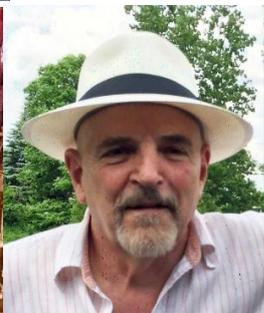


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# 10 BY 10

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## FLASH FICTION STORIES



*C. Lewis Rees, Philip E. Temples, Sean Ryan, Nina Rubinstein Alonso, Caitlin O'Halloran, Salvatore DiFalco, Ann Kammerer, Ken Kapp, Lou Kemmerer, Cindy Rosmus*

**NUMBER 37, MARCH 2026**

Welcome to Issue 37 Our authors come from South Africa, Massachusetts, California, New York State, Canada, Illinois, Wisconsin, Arizona and New Jersey. They have written wonderful and diverse tales to entertain you. You have had the good fortune to have read some of them here before, but there are also three new writers appearing for the first time Sean Ryan, Chris Lewis Rees and Caitlin O'Halloran. So sit back in a comfortable chair, get a cold drink and enjoy!

*Zvi A. Sesling*

*Editor*



**Zvi A. Sesling**, Brookline, MA Poet Laureate (2017-2020), has published numerous poems and flash fiction. He edited *Muddy River Poetry Review* and now edits *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*. Sesling recently published *Wheels*, a flash fiction chapbook. His full volume flash fiction book is *Secret Behind The Gate*. His most recent flash fiction book is *40 Stories* co-authored with Paul Beckman. His forthcoming books are *Selected and New Poetry* and a flash fiction book titled *Infidelities*. He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



**C. Lewis Rees** was born and raised in Natal. He has practised and studied Psychology for 45 years. He still studies psychology although he no longer practises. He is a full-time writer and lives in Cape Town with his wife and two teenage children. His work has appeared in *African Writers Magazine*, *New Contrast*, *Kalahari Review* and *The Cape Times*. He is currently working on a novel and a memoir and is compiling a collection of short stories.

### **Mightier Than The Sword**

He looked like trouble the moment he joined our writing group. Most people join the group by being invited by one of the members. Not him! He emailed Clemintine our secretary and asked to join saying that his genres were memoir and literary fiction. The rest of us didn't have anything so fancy as a genre. We just wrote on whatever topic Josephine our chair announced that month.

He limped into our meeting room just before the start time and said "Sorry I came as fast as my fat little legs would carry me." Irony was clearly his thing because his legs were long. But his voice was thin and reedy. He sounded like he was being strangled. This became an issue for him because the structure of our meetings required us to read our stories aloud every month. He said that, unlike poems, stories should not be read out loud but that the words should do their work silently on the page. Josephine dismissed this airily even though he quoted Sol Stein's 'Solutions for writers,' in support of his argument. He and Josephine were constantly skirmishing from then on. He pushed the boundaries everywhere but especially on the topics we were set monthly. He wrote well but consistently got the lowest marks from the two critics every month because his literary fiction stories often bore only a tenuous connection to topics like 'write a fairy tale' or 'horror story.' When he received his criticism with his low marks for his story on 'superheroes' he smirked and said "That story has just been accepted for publication by the Kalahari Review.

He admitted to being fanatical about wanting to improve his writing and was irritated by the rest of us who were more interested in just having fun and getting together monthly over

a shared hobby and tea and cake. He didn't ever partake of the tea and cake because he was fasting and only ate one meal a day. His low-level warfare with Josephine continued and I thought for sure he would be the first person ever to be expelled from our writing circle.

It came to a head one meeting after he had been selected to be a critic. He said that he was only capable of giving honest criticism but would also share ideas about how to fix whatever was wrong in any story he read. True to his word, he did not hold back in his critique. He was busy shredding a story that Bruce had written when Josephine interrupted him with some contradictory comments. He glared at Josephine and held his right index finger in the air with his thumb cocked at right angles, so it looked like a pistol.

“Back off Josephine!” he said, “This is loaded and its lethal!”

Josephine blanched and trailed off. I could see how it was lethal. It was his typing finger.



**Phil Temples** is a product of the Midwest, but he's lived in the greater Boston area for nearly fifty years. Phil has had six novels, a novella and seven story collections published, in addition to over 320 online short stories and photographs. He is a member of the Bagel Bards and O'Hara's writers groups. You can learn more about Phil by visiting his website at <https://temples.com>."

### **Brains Over Brawn**

The big day finally arrived. Tom Renynolds towed his champion pumpkin boat on a custom trailer to the banks of the mighty Mississippi, where he joined dozens of other entries competing in the annual Huckleberry Finn Pumpkin Rally. The winner's purse was actually quite modest: \$500 to the first-place finisher; \$200 for second place; and a mere \$100 for third. Of course, the real prize was the fame and glory of finishing in the top five.

Tom's entry was, by far, the largest competitor at the event, weighing in at over 2,413 pounds at harvest. Even hollowed out, the S.S. Big Bertha checked in at 823 pounds on the judge's scale. People were amazed at Big Bertha's bulk.

"How's she handle?"

"You ever raise a sail with her?"

"How fast can she cruise?"

Tom sat and grinned as he sat in the big orange monstrosity, posing for photos. Eager fans touched her surface in reverence. The other pumpkin sailors were quite jealous of all the attention paid to Tom and Big Bertha.

When the big moment arrived, the vessels and their captains stood ready at the water's edge for the starting pistol. When the race commenced, they jumped into their pumpkin vessels and were pushed by volunteer crews into the water. The captains paddled with all their might to be the first to cross the finish line five miles downriver. Two outboard skiffs patrolled the race course in the event that a vessel capsized.

Tom had trained vigorously for months at the local gym. Unlike many of the other overweight captains who sported beer guts, he was in top physical condition. Even though his arms felt like they were on fire, Tom kept up a blistering pace, leaving the other competitors behind—all except one. He recalled seeing the odd, green-colored pumpkin pull up to the event just minutes before the start of the race. It was a strange-looking craft, more elliptical than circular in shape, paddled by a wisp of a girl who looked to be no older than fourteen or fifteen years old. She was gaining rapidly on Tom and Big Bertha. Moments later, Tom saw the pumpkin boat pull up even with him on his starboard. Etched on the side of the boat were the words "S.S. Minnow."

"Hey! That's not a pumpkin!" Tom yelled at the female captain. "That's a goddamned watermelon!"

She just smiled at Tom as she passed.

He could see that the craft was hydrodynamically streamlined, allowing it to cut effortlessly through the water with little expended effort.

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Tom finally crossed the finish line an hour later, in second place. Immediately, he made his way to the judge's stand to lodge a formal complaint, but his argument fell on deaf ears.

"Mister Reynolds—there's nothing here in the rules that says you can't enter a pumpkin-watermelon hybrid. That's exactly what Sissy's craft is—a hybrid. Sorry, but it looks like brains triumphed over brawn this year."



**Sean Ryan** is happy to be alive. In a world full of conflict and strife, writing helps him find meaning and comfort. He loves to read in: English, German and French. His Spanish is good, but not great. Living in Southern California his whole life has been a dream. He is not a wealthy man in the worldly sense, but in creativity and thoughtfulness, he's rich beyond measure. He lives in San Diego, CA.

### **The Will at Work**

I am fifty years old. Recently divorced. That's all you need to know about me to make this story make sense.

Six hours ago, I was sitting at my computer. I had an email open and I was composing. I was talking to myself, "I just need to ask her if she wants to go out with me. All indications are that we share a mutual interest. Sexual? I hope so." I got up. Paced the room.

I went up the highest shelf in the closet and took down my bottle of Irish whiskey. I uncapped it and drank down a few ounces then sat back at the computer.

"All I need to do is send her something small. I just need to tell her how I feel. I don't need to write a sonnet. I just need to tell her that I'm into her. What woman doesn't like to hear that? Women love guys who are into them. At least, at the very least, she'll want to get to know me. We've been friendly over the years. She knew my ex-wife, but not too well. I don't have anything to worry about there."

I took the bottle in my hand and drank another two ounces to fortify myself. I sat typing, erasing, and typing some more. I thought I had it.

"I can send it and I can't take it back. I mean, the only way I can take it back is if I crack into her email account. That wouldn't be establishing trust. That would be desperation."

I had my message and I was ready to send it when I got a phone call. It was her. I could see her name, Julie. I only knew one Julie. It was the woman I'd been trying to email for the last thirty minutes

"Hello?"

"Yes, I'll go out with you. You are too cute."

"What are you talking about?"

"You remember we had that video chat last week?" She laughed. "Remember, the one about whether or not you wanted to join the book club I was inviting you to?"

"Oh, right. I remember."

"Well, you didn't turn it off. When I realized you didn't disengage, I kept my feed on as well. I've been a good girl, up until this afternoon. I couldn't hold off anymore. I turned you on and saw you there, talking to yourself, and when I realized you were talking about me, I was flattered. So, yes. I'll go out with you. We can work out the details later."

"I'm glad," I said. "You saved me some anxiety. I'll talk to you later. I'm really going to turn my feed off this time."

"Okay. I'm no good as a spy anyway."

"Goodbye."



**Nina Rubinstein Alonso's** work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Broadkill Review*, *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, *BagelBards Anthology*, *Peacock Journal*, etc. Publications: *This Body* by Godine Press, *Riot Wake* by Cervena Barva, *Distractions En Route* by Ibbetson Street Press, *Travels With Fernando* by Wilderness House Press, *Balancing On One Leg* by Wilderness House Press, *The Ones I Could Tell Anything* by Ibbetson Street.

### **What's Next?**

Jake hears someone jogging down the street, then the wind rattling maple branches by the window. Armando should be here by now, so where is he? A message pings his phone, "Car trouble, at Tommy's garage, in touch soon."

His sister Erica leans in the doorway, "Like a cup of tea? I'm going down to the kitchen," gazing through wide green glasses at his heavily bandaged ankle, his cane.

"Yeah, okay," Jake says. He slipped on an icy sidewalk in the dark, she drove him to urgent care, the x-ray showing a broken fifth metatarsal, his ankle severely sprained, healing slow. He works remotely, handles real-estate business questions, takes phone calls, but needs help going anywhere, frustrating.

He'd been considering an island vacation, heard St Maarten's worth the expense as it's warm, relaxing. He's sick of winter dragging on, never liked it, not one of those folks pulling on a jolly woolen cap eager to hike snowy trails. Hears Erica's slow steps going downstairs, bad knees. "The body, it's always something." Turns on the tv, watches clips of international disasters, political wrangling, violent attacks, catastrophic injuries people survive making his pain seem trivial.

Soon Erica puts a cup of tea on his desk. "Thanks," he says, squeezes the tea bag, tosses it in the trash, takes a sip. "Nice," though could have used more honey. Eve, his ex, left him, later moved in with Allen, the lawyer who helped her through the divorce and found ways to squeeze more money out of him. "Am I bitter? Hell, yeah!"

He dozes in his gray armchair, wakes still seeing dream images of a blue-faced alien with pointed ears who's looking in the window trying to decide whether or not it's worth the effort to transport this injured human to his space ship. Jake opens a desk drawer, takes out sketching paper, chooses an azure blue pencil for the face, ears spiky, eyes dark angular slits.

Armando arrives, Erica brings him upstairs. “Sorry I’m late,” he says, “carburetor needed cleaning. Can’t stay, late for another appointment.”

“Okay, thanks for bringing the files,” hears him skitter down the stairs. Armando’s tall with rather pointed ears, but his face isn’t azure blue.



**Caitlin O'Halloran** is a writer living in Rochester, New York. Her poetry and fiction have been published in literary magazines, including *ONE ART*, *confetti*, *Twin Bird Review* and *Third Wednesday*. She is a slush reader for *The Metaworker*. [www.caitlinohalloran.com](http://www.caitlinohalloran.com)

### **The Martin Family Reunion**

Evening was winding down at the Martin family reunion and most of the adults were sitting in beach chairs around the bonfire, drinking boxed wine from red plastic Solo cups. Aunt Mimi was trying to put the children to bed at the house they had rented for the weekend. It had taken her nearly forty minutes to wrangle the 5 year old twins and tuck them into their beds, but when she went back outside to look for her 11 year old niece Becca and 7 year old nephew Nicky, the twins managed to escape.

“If you all can’t keep it down, you can at least put that fire out. It’s way past their bedtime,” said Aunt Mimi.

Uncle Frank was more than a little drunk, so he slurred his words as he told her “Don’t worry about it. We’re on vacation. Kids can stay up a little longer.”

This declaration induced squeals of excitement from the twins who were more than happy to stay up as late as they could. Aunt Mimi sighed and shook her head, then grabbed a plastic cup and filled it to the brim with wine.

Becca started another round of hide and seek with the other kids. She counted to 100 by saying, “1 Mississippi, 2 Mississippi,” and so on, something her mother had taught her to do to keep her from rushing the count. It only took about 30 minutes for Becca to find the others, all except Nicky, who was still missing.

“Aunt Mimi,” said Becca. “Nicky’s cheating. I’ve looked everywhere.”

“When did you see him last? He was playing with all of you, right?”

Becca frowned while she tried to remember. “I don’t know. When it was light out, I think.”

Aunt Mimi realized then that Nicky had been missing since at least sunset.

“Has anyone seen Nicky?” said Uncle Frank. The realization that Nicky was missing had cut through the drunken haze. Everyone scrambled from their chairs and began the search, using their phones as flashlights and calling Nicky’s name out into the night.

Uncle Frank called the police who said they would send the coast guard. Aunt Mimi tried not to cry, as she led the search along the shore. A few frantic minutes had gone by when she finally heard the sound of Nicky’s laugh. “Nicky!” she called out. And there he was, sitting on a large rock, surrounded by snails.

“What were you doing?”

“These are my friends, Aunty Mimi. They’re showing me how to be a snail, see!” And as a demonstration, he sat with his knees under him and curled over himself, hiding his face, covering his ears, pretending to be a snail.



**Salvatore Difalco** writes from Toronto, Canada

### **Nonna Is Not A Witch**

She is not a witch. Yes, Nonna always wears black. In the cold, in the heat. In all seasons. Always black. Not always the same dress or blouse, but always black. She wears black in mourning for my Nonno, who passed away years ago in Sicily. But Nonna doesn't wear a pointed hat. She doesn't cast spells. She doesn't fly around on a broom. Yes, she is hunched. Yes, her hair is gray and long and scraggly. Yes, she has no teeth. Yes, her nose is long. Yes, her chin is long. Yes, she has a hairy mole on her chin. But she is not a witch.

Patty Sullivan and Brenda Maddick accuse her of making evil potions by boiling stuff like eye of newt and toads and scorpions in a cauldron. Perhaps while visiting my house on a Sunday after church, they witnessed Nonna bent over the stove stirring a big pot with a big wooden spoon and they mistook this for something witchy. But on Sundays Nonna makes her special ragu—loaded with sausage and meatballs and pork ribs—for the whole family. How could Patty and Brenda mistake the perfume of Nonna's ragu for an evil potion made from eye of newt?

One evening, Nonna and I sit on the front porch, taking in the summer air and people-watching. Nonna doesn't say much. I don't mind. I like to hang out with her even when we don't talk. She sits on a stool she brought back from Sicily and peels an apple with a curved knife, also from the old country. She offers me a slice. The apple is soft and sweet. Nonna needs it soft so she can gum it. Just as she offers me another slice, Patty and Brenda appear. They look at Nonna and laugh. Then they say something, but the din of a passing jalopy drowns it out.

Nonna wants to know why they're laughing. I tell her in Sicilian they think she's a witch. She looks at me with her small black eyes and smiles. She tells me it's not the first time someone called her a witch. Even in Sicily people did. When I ask her why she just continues smiling.

The following evening Nonna and I sit on the porch, taking in the summer air and people-watching. Nonna is quiet. She isn't smiling, but she's almost smiling. I wonder why. I'm afraid to ask what she's thinking. She peels a pear and offers me a slice. The pear is soft and sweet. Just as she offers me another slice, Patty and Brenda appear. I start. Something is different about them. Their ears. Their ears are enormous. They look like donkey ears. Hasn't anybody told them? I glance at Nonna. She smiles. Patty and Brenda walk like nothing's wrong, like they don't have donkey ears. But this time when they look at Nonna they don't laugh.



**Ann Kammerer** lives near Chicago, and is a native of Michigan. Her short fiction and poetry is typically set in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, and examines the tensions and ideals of American families and individuals residing in declining Midwestern cities. She has published multiple chapbooks of narrative poetry through independent presses in the U.S. and abroad, including four through Bottlecap Press, and one each through Kelsay Books and Impsired, and she's appeared in anthologies by Querencia Press, Workers Write!, and Crow Woods Publishing. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Fictive Dream*, *One Art*, *Chiron Review*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *The Broken Spine*, *10 by 10 Flash*, *Cold Caller Magazine*, *Open Arts Forum*, *Cajun Mutt Press*, and elsewhere, and at [annkammerer.com](http://annkammerer.com)

## **DEL Fries**

Gordy swung his Cutlass into a lot lined with phone poles and wires. A triangular sign tossed neon over a concrete block building, while a utility light glared on rough-cut plywood that was hand-lettered and proclaimed: "THE RAIL. Best EATS IN Town!!! HOME of DEL Fries!"

"Your big sis is gonna love this place, won't she?" Gordy parked and elbowed my little sister Janie. He winked at me in the rearview mirror and ran a black plastic comb through his hair.

"You oughta brush up too." Gordy spit on his fingers and raked Janie's bangs. "No girlfriend of mine should look like you."

"Gordy, DON'T." Janie slapped him. Gordy slapped back.

"Now be a good girl," Gordy said. "And bring your big sister in. Not every day she comes to visit us in Battle Creek."

Hopping from the car, he swaggered to the bar, his legs bowing in his worn boots.

"No. WAIT." Janie jumped out and chased Gordy. She grabbed the tails of his jean jacket as they entered The Rail.

I lit a cigarette and got out, too, a flock of dark birds murmuring overhead as I opened the steel door and stepped in. Dim light landed on a row of crouched men, their heads sinking slowly as their lips met their drinks.

“Hey. Over here.” Gordy shouted from a red-tinted corner, his body blinking with jukebox light. “Quite a place, ain’t it?”

I sat next to Janie as she smoked and drank Coke. Gordy clapped and pointed to a framed faded portrait of a clear-skinned man with a pompadour and endlessly sparkling eyes.

“Yepper-yep,” Gordy said. “There you be. Del Shannon. A rock ‘n roll legend, played ‘round these parts of Battle Creek, don’t ‘cha know?”

Gordy dropped a quarter in the jukebox. He swiveled his hips and hooted.

“Ya. Let’s hear it.”

Rings formed in Janie’s Coke as Gordy sat down and rapped the table to “Runaway.”

“How come you didn’t tell your sister here?” Gordy poked Janie. “You know. About THE DEL.”

Gordy swilled his drink and began singing in Janie’s ear.

“A-run-run, run, run, runaway.”

Janie shrunk, her shoulders raising as Gordy screeched the high notes.

“Man girl. Why don’t ‘cha sing?” Gordy shook his head.

“Go on. Go make yourself useful.” Gordy slapped quarters in front of Janie, commanding her to play more DEL.

“You know. Play that ‘Hats off to Larry’ or something. Go on.”

Janie’s fingers edged toward the quarters then curled away.

“No.” she said.

Gordy flattened both hands on the table and leaned in.

“Yes.” he said.

Janie said no again, their declarations louder and louder as they volleyed.

“No.”

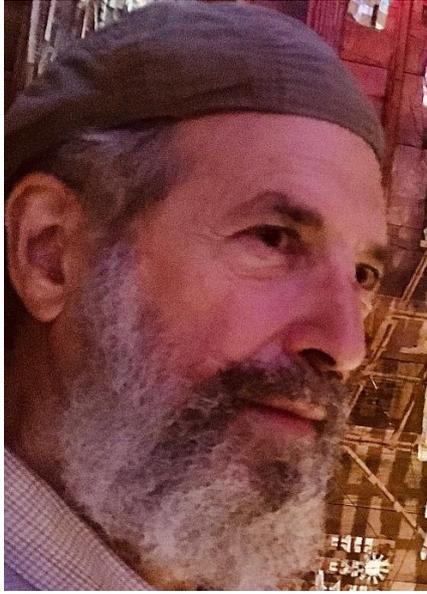
“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Pocketing the quarters, I stepped away, taking my place at the bar beside a sallown-skinned man, his eyes half-fixed on the local news.

“Want a DEL fry?” The man nudged a red basket of burnt crispy fries with a blood-blistered finger. “They’re still good. Even when they’re cold.”



**Kenneth M. Kapp** lives with his wife in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, writing late into the night in his man-cave. He enjoys chamber music and mysteries. Please visit [www.kmkbooks.com](http://www.kmkbooks.com). He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His stories have appeared in more than one hundred publications worldwide.

### Years Later

As he lay dying in a hospice bed, Leon recalled an empty lot in Brooklyn and grimaced. Eighty years ago, there were still empty lots in Brooklyn, anxious mothers always cautioning, “There’s always broken glass, boards with rusty nails, and all kinds of garbage. I don’t care what the other mothers say, I don’t want you playing in them.”

*George. I had a friend named George. He was a grade ahead of me. We’d walk three blocks to the nearest corner of the lot and then, if we didn’t see any big kids, it was ours to explore. In the middle of the summer, we discovered a deep hole in the far side of the lot. We peeked over the edge, whispered that either they planned to bury a body or had found the buried treasure. We always joked about “them” never saying who “they” were. We were afraid to go back for two weeks.*

Leon closed his eyes. It was late October; the sun was setting and temperatures were falling. The heat came on, and the radiators began knocking.

The hospice nurse saw him stir and wiped his forehead. “Are you too warm, Leon? I could turn the radiator down a tad.”

He shook his head, indicating that he would like to sit up, rasping, “Sunset.”

The nurse raised the back of his bed and arranged the pillows. She opened the window shades. “Good,” she reported, “there’s still some pink left in the sky.”

When she returned to his bedside, Leon whispered, “Blanket, cold.” And the radiator answered with two clanks, “Yes, I know. I’m doing my best.”

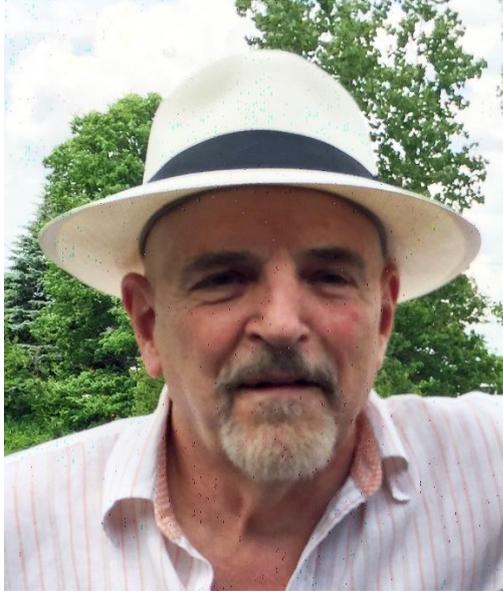
Leon nodded and closed his eyes. His vision had worsened since noon’s weak tea. Radiators. His mother was always turning his bedroom radiator on at night despite his protests that he liked it cold when he slept. One night when she was down the block playing canasta with her friends, he disconnected the old cast-iron radiator and dragged it into his mother’s bedroom. *I must have been thirteen, fourteen tops. I taped a note on it, saying she could now turn it on and off as often as she wished. It stayed in her bedroom until I went away to college when she asked me to reconnect it.*

Leon smiled. His laugh became an unsuccessful cough. He knew he was getting weaker. He listened for the radiator without any luck. He tried to smack his lips, he was thirsty. At least he thought he was thirsty.

The nurse leaned over, "Don't worry, Leon. I'm here. How about a few small ice chips? Or a little sweet tea."

"Chh-chha-ai." His mother always said chai, sweet tea. He was so tired. He closed his eyes.

The nurse felt him go and put the sippy bottle back down on the bureau. She noted the time of his passing on the chart and called the desk.



**Louis Kummerer** is an American writer currently living in Phoenix, Arizona. His work has been published in *10x10 Flash*, *New Delta Review*, *The Brussels Review*, *Bristol Noir*, *Grey Sparrow*, *Yellow Mama*, *Punk Noir*, *Micromance*, *CaféLit*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Friday Flash Fiction* and *101 Words*. A collection of his stories appears at [louk247-fiction.com](http://louk247-fiction.com).

### **For the Good of the People**

“To appease the gods, each year the village must offer up one of our own,” my father proclaims, “A sacrifice for the good of the people.”

My family is gathered around me, my father behind me with his hands on my shoulders. He is warm and friendly towards me in a way that he never has been before.

“This year, the council has honored our family,” he says, “By selecting our daughter as the offering.”

My family cheers. They rush toward me, congratulating me, patting me on the back, giving me hugs as if I’d just been announced as the winner of a competition, as if I am about to become the envy of every other fourteen-year-old girl in the village. I eke out a weak smile, my father’s words still swirling in my head. I’ve been selected.

But I suspect that maybe I wasn’t actually selected, that maybe my father had volunteered me instead. Because I’ve always been the bad one, the one who disobeyed, the one who needed to be punished, the one who had no friends, the one who didn’t fit in, the one who made my father ashamed.

I’ve noticed that it’s always the ones like me who get selected. I wonder how dimwitted the gods must be to not see through this ruse. Year after year, the villagers offering up the bad ones. A sacrifice should mean giving up something that’s dear to you. How is it a sacrifice to give up somebody you don’t want?

I look at my sister and wish I could have ended up like her, married to a warrior, the mother of a strong, beautiful son, a baby that I fell in love with the first time I held him in my arms. The only favor I ever asked of the gods was that someday I too might have a child of my own. This, apparently, is their answer.

On the morning of the ceremony, acolytes dress me in an elegant skirt and give me a potion to drink. They lead me, bare-breasted, through the throng gathered around the altar. When the villagers see me, they begin to cheer and, in my dazed state, I think that maybe they are cheering because they find me pretty.

The acolytes place me face up on the stone surface of the altar. They hold my arms and legs firmly in place and I feel a sudden urge to resist, an urge that I struggle desperately to suppress, because, for once in my life, I want my father to not be ashamed of me.

The priest begins chanting and I steal a glimpse at my sister's baby, hoping to look into his eyes one final time. But he is sleeping peacefully, unaware that I even exist.

The priest ends his chant and raises a knife high above his head. I close my eyes and brace for the blow, hoping that the pain of dying will not be greater than the pain of living.



**Cindy Rosmus** is a diehard Jersey girl who 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*, *Punk Noir*, *Rock and a Hard Place* and *Gemini*. Her story “Toast, Jello, Tea” was nominated for both the 2025 Pushcart and Best Small Fictions prize. 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.

## EARWORM

Twenty years later, he doesn't know me.

But I know him. Dark hair, thinning now. Sexy goatee, brooding eyes.

“Foot-long, or half?”

“Half.”

Ricky's lip curls. Like I'm wasting his time. He slices cold cuts like he hates them. Salami and provolone for the guy before me. Rare roast beef for me.

In the background, 80s music plays. I cringe.

But then, *that* song. Duran Duran. “Hungry Like the Wolf.” Like I'm so hungry for Ricky, I salivate.

Picturing bits of Ricky's flesh stuck in a werewolf's fangs. His lip. Or his ear.

The ear that a worm crawled into.

“An earworm,” Ricky had explained. “Is a song you can't get out of your head.”

Like *this* song?

That look, as he slices roast beef. That curling lip convinces me . . .

It ate through his brain, too.

Karaoke, at *Sing-les*, the bar with the buzzing neon mic in the window.: Nessie, who sang Broadway tunes, off-key. The weird couple—Monica and Roy—smiling and holding hands like they'd been together since high school.

Ricky and me, who stopped speaking once we had sex.

I moved on to Billy. Cool, sexy, with a shaved head.

When we sang "Hungry Like the Wolf," Ricky was mad!

'Cos Billy was with me? Or 'cos he sang better than Ricky?

For spite I brushed up against Billy during our duet.

Now, Ricky slices roast beef with a vengeance.

That night, Monica beckoned me over. Yelling, as Desiree the host, was belting out "I Will Survive."

"If Roy doesn't leave Wifey," Monica told me, "I'll slit my wrists."

A week later, she did.

"Karaoke roulette!" Desiree announced. Some people groaned. "Whatever comes up, you sing. For a free drink. But if you don't . . ." She made it sound ominous. "You buy the bar!"

"I . . ." Ricky said smugly, "can sing anything."

Billy smiled. "So can I."

Ricky glared at him.

Old barfly Gus needed a shot so bad, he went first. "Naughty Girls Need Love, Too," was barely recognizable in his shaky voice. Broadway Nessie got Metallica's "Enter Sandman." Desiree must've fixed this.

Then Billy got "When a Man Loves a Woman." That great '60s song. Ricky's signature tune!

Ricky's eyes looked twice their size. Desiree winked at me.

With the first few bars, Billy proved himself the best singer. Halfway through the song, he'd outshone Ricky, twice over. The crowd roared.

Something stopped me from looking at Ricky. I hated him since he'd dumped me. But maybe . . .

Maybe I loved him.

When I did look, Ricky was gone.

He finished making my sandwich. Too little meat, tomato sliced so thin, I could see through it. "Extra mayo" got me the smallest squirt.

As I leave with my half-sub, guess what song comes on?

"When a Man Loves a Woman."

On an '80s playlist?

I sensed a mystical wink.

And a tingling, as something soft creeps into my ear.