

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #34 - February 1999

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Very Short Stories
Lengths a Power of 2

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Dating From March, 1996
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Back Issues (PDF)

Dating From January, 1999
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**Story Bytes better
than sound bites.**

The Colossal Rise and Tragic Fall of the Disney Empire

M. Stanley Bubien

And everything the king touched turned into gold. [8]

The Man Who Fell in Love

Michael J. Stevens

The man who fell in love took a walk down the street one day. Eventually, he came to an intersection where he paused thoughtfully. Being a careful man, he looked to his left, then looked to his right, then looked to his left again. Seeing that the way was clear, he began to cross the street. And along came the bus that hit him. [64]

What Did People Do?

M. Stanley Bubien

Our baby was still crying as I worked him into his car seat. “Honey! Let’s go!” I called to my wife who’d disappeared in search of some forgotten, last minute—and did I mention unnecessary?—item. “Be right down!”

Michael’s howls drowned my reply, and I glanced at my watch impatiently: 9:15 pm! “What did people do before cars?” I mumbled to myself. Aloud I blurted, “hurry up! It’s late!” as I wrestled Michael’s kicking feet into a blanket.

“I’m right here,” Lydia responded at my side.

Rolling my eyes, I yanked Michael’s seat from the floor, causing a brief pause in his screams, and charged for the garage. Buckling car seat, cranking over engine, and speeding away—the elapsed time barely registered in seconds.

Michael had returned to his cries, but as we wound the onramp onto the highway, he snuffled. I clung the wheel as I accelerated to a constant—and slightly illegal—75 mph., but I began to notice that the rhythmic thrum of the engine. Michael was obviously fading, and after a few more whimpers on his part, finally, silence set in.

My grip loosened on the steering wheel. “He asleep?” I asked Lydia.

She leaned her chair back and adjusted his blanket. Righting herself, she sighed relief, but said, “drive a little longer—to be sure.”

I let my ears take in the quiet like breathing fresh air. After a respite, I asked, “what did people do before cars?”

My wife glanced back at Michael, shook her head and chuckled. “Suffered, I guess.” [256]

Delible Ink on Paper

M. Stanley Bubien

“I did not want this,” I told my Chancellor, proffering the “Danger of War” declaration I had presently signed; no more than spidery letters, delible ink on paper, something so fragile that it could be easily frayed, torn, burned even; and yet it fully prefigured an inevitability, preparing our armies for mobilization.

“Ah, Majesty,” he replied, accepting the order for the Admiralty. “Yesterday, you howled your anger at the Russians. Called your very own cousin Nicholas the most unrepeatable of names! It seems to me that the evening’s passing has left you overly cooled. May I reiterate once again that this is most certainly for the best.”

“Humph,” I waved off my previous day’s rage with a sweep of my good arm. “And how, pray tell, will this be for the best?”

“On so many occasions, I have heard you, yourself, declare your intention to achieve a ‘Place in the Sun’ for the German peoples.”

“Of course,” I agreed, matter-of-factly. “As Kaiser, I have striven for this noble goal.”

“Ah, but all that remains of Europe are places of shade.” He waved the document before me. “This, however, changes so much. It opens so many possibilities. First, against those uncivilized Slavs. And also, as you certainly need no reminding, the Eastern occupied territories of those nameless Poles.”

I hunched silently within my seat, my great teak desk before me, spanning forward, extending sideways in its girth, immovable, save by the strength of five men, in its mass. I always sought a measure of potency leaning upon this desk, for the strength of its ancient trunk held me up and sustained me at times. Oft considered the most powerful man in Europe, this desk, more than anything else—territories, armies, navies—allowed me the luxury to believe as much once or twice during my rule. Just as now, it seemed the only thing solid enough to prop these pages, the weightiest the world has ever known, which I had scattered upon it over the last several days.

“I hate the Slavs, though it is a sin to say so, it is most certainly the truth.” And with that confession, I brought myself to my feet, and strode around

the desk, advanced to the open part of the room, and paced with boots thumping firmly upon the flooring, while in contrast, the medals upon my uniform rattled lightly.

“All men are sinners,” the Chancellor informed me, as his eyes followed my progress, to and fro, about the chamber. “That much we both know. But to hate those who deserve your hatred? I am not convinced that such a thing is evil.”

I halted, turned fully on him, and cocked my head. “Be that as it may, I believe it was these feelings, in part, that motivated me to agree to your declaration of support for Emperor Joseph and Austria-Hungary.”

“Well,” the Chancellor began in a slightly contradictory tone, “I must point out that the Emperor has been a mighty ally for quite a number of years.”

I exhaled and nodded. “Certainly.”

“And in the tradition of our Teutonic ancestors, we are honor-bound to adhere to that agreement. And you have been informed that the Austrian army has already begun their invasion of Serbia.”

“Yes, of course,” I said, gesturing toward the page in my Chancellor’s hand, “and with the Russian army moving as well, I realize the necessity of this.”

He broke into a grin. “You should also realize that this is merely a beginning. Once we have taken our place in the sun, you shall no longer be known as Kaiser.”

My eyebrows furled. “Oh?”

“Leading the German peoples to victory, certainly many will refer to you as one of legend; even, I must say, as a god!”

I thrust myself forward, threw a clenched fist toward his projecting nose, and, index finger extended, I cried, “Fool! Get out! Take that damnable order and leave.” Unabashed, he complied to my command with a bow. He retreated, and the door creaked wide, and he twisted slightly, and as he stepped through, I called afterward, slightly less gruffly, “pray, my friend. Pray that it goes no further than this. For if England enters this struggle alongside Russia, I will then be at war with both my cousin and nephew.”

He hesitated, grasped the jamb, arched his neck slightly.

I knew his thought, knew the words he would speak, so surely I could speak them myself. “Go!” I ordered, halting his response, and driving him finally from my presence.

“A god,” I shook my head, “humph, damnable fool!”

And with that I glanced upon my desk the papers, in reality, a small pile, emblazoned with various official seals, spun of such delicate pulp, yet again I fully realized that only this teak masterwork could prop such a burden. For, in the two days that they had flooded across my desk, I had come to know them, memorize them, and, above all, despise them.

But it was one in particular, a Serbian document, a reply—a full capitulation, no less—to the most formidable, and absolutely absurd, demand imposed by the Austrian state upon her enemy. I lifted it lightly between fingertips, and it flopped slightly as I studied it.

“Fool,” I had called my Chancellor. But surely that was my designation, for this document, sent to Austria-Hungary several weeks ago, had been completely ignored by myself until day before yesterday. And there, in the margins, in an ink so delible, were words that I should have written not two nights ago, but twenty. “A great moral victory for Vienna; but with it every reason for war is removed—” Unable to read any further, I allowed the page to drop to the floor.

“God,” my Chancellor had called me. And yet, alone in my office, before my great teak desk, I considered also the statement I had halted him from speaking in his departure. For, as he well knew, today I was totally powerless; war would soon rage across our land, and there was not one single thing that I, the Kaiser of Germany, could do to stop it. [1024]

Revenge

Mark Hansen

Right then and there, I knew it was time to stop. I didn't know how I was going to achieve that lofty goal, but I knew it had to happen. What had started as a simple revenge fantasy, had gotten way out of control. Seven years of hell for both of us, with our young daughter caught in the middle.

Anger is an interesting emotion. It has a burning power within it, but it desperately wants to die out. Only a concerted effort by both of us had kept the fire alive. For if it was to vanish, we would be faced with the pain of our loss. The loss of our family and all the love, affection and security that went with it. Though, ironically, it was the distinct lack of these qualities that had ended our marriage.

Sarah was only 6 months old when we separated. The anger between us was almost constant. Life was unbearable, marriage counselling futile. How can two people possibly hope to unravel abusive childhoods while living together and trying to care for a baby? We couldn't, that was obvious, and after 3 months of therapy, we parted. She, with Sarah, to her parents, while I stayed in the flat, alone. And that was the overriding feeling that hit me: loneliness. I missed them both terribly and my hopes rose each Thursday as we continued with counselling, only to fall into a depression after each session when it became clear that there was no hope.

Three months later I called it quits, then recanted a week later. We struggled through another 3 months, by which time it was her turn to end it for good. Still we clung on for 3 months more as we slowly let go of each other and our dreams of family life. The pain was intense, we both fought it, lashing out with vengeful attacks. She denied me access to Sarah, I delayed maintenance payments. The game we played went through so many levels and permutations, I often got lost, and forget why we were playing.

Sarah suffered in the middle of this battle. I remember dropping her back to Angela's place one time, and as we talked, Sarah grabbed our hands and put them together. For years, when I'd leave, Sarah would stand on the verandah with tears pouring down her face, begging me not to go. I would get so upset that I wanted to yell at Angela, "how dare you ruin our lives like this?"

Last Sunday, even though it wasn't my day to see Sarah, I rang up on the off chance that she might be free for a few hours. As it turned out she had a party to attend near my place, and I offered to help Angela by picking Sarah up and driving her. I organised to go early so I'd get to spend some time with Sarah beforehand. An hour later I arrived at Angela's local library (since we had agreed to always meet on neutral territory), and Sarah swapped cars along with all her beach party gear. I loaded her and everything in and walked around the front toward my door. The road had a new wet patch which I sourced back to my car. I didn't want it to be what I damn well knew it was. Leaning in through my window, I popped the bonnet and walked to the front again. By this time Sarah had got out and joined me.

"What's the matter, Daddy?"

"See that water down there? I think the radiator's got a leak. Stand back while I open up the bonnet." My fingers found the catch and I slowly lifted, hoping that a hose had just worked loose. I propped the bonnet on its stand and bent down for a closer inspection. Sarah copied my pose.

"I think I can see some steam near that small hose there, but don't touch, 'cause it'll be really hot."

"So what's wrong, Daddy?"

"That hose has split and the water has leaked out. I'm sorry darlin', but I won't be able to take you to the party. We'd better get you back to mummy's, so she can take you instead."

I closed the bonnet and kept an eagle eye on the temperature gauge as we drove the two minutes back to Angela's new house.

Angela and Jack had bought the house less than a year ago, to start their new family. Sarah now had a baby sister, and I had heard from my grandmother that another one was on the way. I hated them for moving away. It meant that I saw Sarah much less. There had been two phone fights relating to it, and Jack had threatened to punch me in the mouth if I came near their house. So, when we arrived, I was unsure how to proceed.

"Sarah, can you run in and tell mummy that my car has broken down, and to come out to talk."

I helped her cross the road and she ran to the front door. I retreated to my car and waited. Angela came out with Sarah and approached me.

"What's the matter?" Angela asked.

"The radiators got a leak. I need to get it to a service station so they can

take a look. I'm afraid you'll have to drive Sarah."

"Are you with the National Road Service?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to use my mobile to call them?"

This is where my memory of events becomes a bit vague. Mainly because, when Angela lent me her mobile, I was shocked. This was the kindest thing she had done for me in 7 years, and when she offered it to me, I looked at her. By that I mean, I really looked at her—at her face, eyes, arms, legs, and body. I took her in as a person for the first time in such a long while. Right then and there I knew the anger and hatred had to stop, because I felt something I had been trying hard not to feel.

I looked at Angela and I missed her. [1024]