

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #35 - March 1999

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Story Bytes

Very Short Stories
Lengths a Power of 2

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**Story Bytes better
than sound bites.**

The Dying Gasp of the Man Who Almost Had It All

M. Stanley Bubien

“**I**...want... it... all...” [4]

Promise to Tell Me

M. Stanley Bubien

“Dad, I have a question,” I asked as my wife departed, clearing the dinner she’d prepared. Chicken cacciatore, his—and my—favorite, a meal which was a sort of breaking-in of her new kitchen.

“Shoot,” Dad prompted, sipping his wine.

My wife reentered abruptly. To distract her from our conversation, as she reached for more dishes from the dining room table, I kissed her hand. She smiled, and when she was gone, I continued, “Before I ask, Dad, you have to promise to tell me.”

“Tell you? What’d you mean?”

I shook my head. “Just promise. Okay. Promise to tell me.”

Resting hands near the crystal, he shrugged, but nodded.

“I’ve been wondering for a while...” I wiped my mouth. “Dad,” I sighed.

“Are you proud of me?” [128]

Valentine's Day

Mark Hansen

Valentine's Day has come and gone for this year, and I only got one small present. That may sound like I'm complaining, but I'm not, for it was the most wonderful gift I have ever received on that special day.

Commercialism has ruined many of our annual celebrations—Easter, Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day. The true meaning is often lost in advertising hype. There are ready-made cards for every occasion, so it's easy to pick someone else's words and send them to a loved one. That's what was different about the card that went with this present—it was hand made. My daughter was the first to inform me of its arrival, late in the afternoon.

"Daddy, I'm ringing you about a surprise. A Valentine's Day card is here for you. I went down to check the mail-box and it was just there. Isn't that exciting?"

"That's great darling. I wonder who it's from?" Who would send me a card, addressed to my parent's place? A girlfriend from my University days, perhaps?

"Come up to Nanna's, and open it?"

Driving along reminded me of the conversation I'd had with my daughter after lunch. I'd been dropping her off to her grandparents for the afternoon.

"So, Sarah, do you know what day it is today?"

"No, Daddy."

"It's Valentine's Day."

"What's Val-in-tynes Day?"

"It's a special day where people send cards and flowers and gifts to those they love. But they don't have to tell them who its from—though some do."

"Why wouldn't they want them to know?" What an excellent question. I paused to analyse the Valentine's Day tradition before offering a reason.

"I guess that way it's kind of a mystery and makes it exciting."

By the time I arrived, I still wasn't certain who the gift was from, but I started to have a few suspicions. Sarah ran up to me after I walked in the front

door, and held out a small envelop with a huge bulge in it. There was ample sticky-tape around the top to keep it all in. I took the tiny package and examined it closely. My name and address were on the front in hand-writing that looked familiar. On the back were a series of love-hearts—red, green, blue, orange, pink and black—larger ones at the bottom and some tiny ones at the top. One large pink heart had a bow drawn across its middle. I looked at my mother and she smiled.

“Isn't it good you got a card, Daddy?”

“Yes its great, but let's see who it's from.” I carefully opened it and extracted its precious contents.

“A beautiful flower, a sea shell, and a lovely round pebble. What wonderful gifts. Now let's see what the card says. ‘Dear Michael James Andrews, I love you and wish you a happy Valentines Day. Love from ?’ And there's another pink love-heart with a bow down the bottom.”

“It must be a mystery girlfriend Daddy.”

“Yes, and someone who obviously loves me very much.” [512]

Or Maybe a Gift

M. Stanley Bubien

It's funny that I would be so uncomfortable here, while earlier, when I really should have felt uneasy, I'd been fine. But as the technician applied the gel to my prone wife's belly, I sat off to the corner, leaning with forearms against knees, inhaling deeply through my nose.

"Your first?" the tech asked Kathleen, though I caught a knowing smirk from him in my direction.

"Yep," I answered for her.

"And no sonogram yet, either?" He reached for the probes, and when I thought about that word—"probe"—I bowed further forward.

"It's not that bad," he said. "No blood!"

"My husband's not too good around doctor stuff, medicine." She frowned, half-serious, but half-humorous. "At least that what he tells me."

"It's true!" I offered in my own defense. "My family wanted me to be a doctor, like my dad, but there was no way! I can't even watch medical shows on TV. I'm squeamish."

"You weren't earlier, though," Kathleen stated in a soft, gracious tone, smile barely visible.

"What happened earlier?" the tech asked. But instead of an answer, Kathleen and I simply looked at each other.

"Apologies," he said. "I've overstepped my bounds. Why don't I go ahead and explain the process." Kathleen nodded, and he told us how the sonogram worked, and how he'd thoroughly check our unborn baby over for problems. I could see Kathleen's smile growing as he applied the flat sensors against her and reach over to tune the computer screen.

For the first ten minutes, I simply alternated between watching the floor or the tech's motions, even over his exclamations of "there's the head," or Kathleen's "oh, look at all that moving around!" and "you can see the whole body!"

I wasn't avoiding this, and that's God's honest truth. I had made a conscious decision to be here even if I was squeamish. This was, after all, the first time we would actually see our child—and that had become so much more

“At the risk of overstepping my bounds again,” the tech said, “have you picked a name?”

As Kathleen’s tears welled I told him, “Stasia.”

“Stasia? That’s beautiful! And very unusual.”

“It’s... my grandmother’s name,” Kathleen whispered.

The tech nodded as though he understood, but, really, he had no idea.

I hesitated, but as my wife wiped her eyes, she breathed, “go ahead.”

“Our grandmother died this morning,” I told him. “We were with her.”

Technically, she’d died last night, but after resuscitating her, the doctors errantly put her on a respirator. “No extreme measures,” she had explicitly stated. But I guess when her heart stopped, and the code blue went out, they were too busy to read that tiny detail on the chart.

The call came from Kathleen’s mother in the wee hours, and we headed down to the hospital, arriving just before they disconnected life-support. Kathleen, her father, and especially her mother, comforted our unconscious grandmother as instruments showed the fade in her heart’s beating.

Medicinal odors surrounded me, and death loomed close enough to touch, yet I alternated in the hand-holding, crying, and speaking to grandmother. Many things I said—many things we all said—but through the tears, all I remember was one repeated phrase.

“I love you.”

Generally, we were unhappy with the doctors’ mistake, but it had given us one last chance to speak those words—though, in the coma, it was doubtful grandmother actually heard.

But who knows?

“Is that why you decided to come today?” the tech asked me, obviously referring to my current discomfort.

“No,” I admitted. “I was planning on being here anyway.”

“It was just a coincidence,” Kathleen sniffed.

“Or maybe a gift,” I added. “We’re not really sure.”

And now, this time, when he nodded, it seemed he truly did understand. A moment of silence passed—not the uncomfortable kind, but the solemn kind.

Since the tech was in charge, it was inevitably his duty to break that silence. “I’ve printed a number of pictures. You can keep them.” He grinned at me with bright white teeth. “Just in case you want to look at them—over and over again!”

before she swung onto the floor to change, I hopped up and stopped her with a kiss on the lips.

“I love you,” I said.

“You did great.”

“Well, I guess,” I shrugged. “I was thinking though...” And reaching down and touching Kathleen’s now-sticky tummy, I leaned over the spot where my hand rested and said, “I love you too.”

After all, who knows? [1024]

For Stasia Popowski and Torrey Stasia Bubien.

What Is It that You Want from Me?

Joseph Lerner

“**W**hat is it that you want from me?” Carol said. Her dachshund, Harry, jumped at her bare legs, which made her jump too. The weather, though promising, was still much too cold.

“What is it that I want?” Mike asked, walking faster to keep up with her.

“What is it that I want?” he repeated.

They stopped before the office building where he worked.

“Well?” she said. “Are you going inside?”

“Come inside with me.”

“I can’t take the dog, remember? Unlike my company.”

In his office he kept glancing out the window toward where he had last seen her. Eventually he turned to the papers and mail stacked haphazardly on his desk. “What is it that you want?” he asked, staring morosely at them.

He picked up several letters at random. One advertised baby products—formula, diapers, toys. He wondered how he had gotten on that mailing list. Another was a brochure from the company’s travel agent.

It advertised specials for Aruba, the Antilles, Malta. He remembered his and Carol’s first (and only) long vacation—to Thailand and Bali—just before getting married. The vacation had gone well except that when they had returned to pick up Harry from the pound they had found him so traumatized that he had become skittish and depressed for weeks.

Carol did not forget that it was Mike who had persuaded her, against her better judgment, to board the dachshund.

He put down the mail. What is it that you want from me? Early in their relationship such questions had been a game, light-hearted and teasing. During sex: what is it that you want now? Walking Harry: if dogs dream, are they random or do they spring from fear, hope and desire, like ours? With friends: which ones are true friends, and which just want something?

But lately her questions, if prosaic in one sense, were also more barbed:

Don't you want a better job, have children, own our own home?

Mike got little done that morning, and at noon when a co-worker, Don, asked if he wanted to go with him and Liz, another co-worker, to lunch, he said yes, forgetting he had planned to meet Carol.

They decided on the corner deli because of its proximity, but found it so crowded they were forced to stand in line in the cold anyway.

After they sat and ordered, Liz said, "I am beside myself."

"Why?" asked Don, who had squeezed beside her in the tiny booth. People jostled each other in the take-out line just next to Mike, and he had to lean forward to hear his co-workers.

"It's my apartment," Liz said. "There's water seeping up from the kitchen floor, the fuses are always shorting, and the back door steps are broken. I've told the landlord, but he says I have to fix them."

"That's illegal," said Don. "Let me talk to my attorney."

"What's worse," Liz continued, "the landlord lives next door, and his dog is always tearing up my garden." She paused. "I'm thinking of burying poisoned food pellets out there. Just enough to make him sick," she added quickly.

Both Don and Mike fell silent. All three ate quickly—half their lunch hour already had been spent waiting and ordering—and then returned to the office.

Mike phoned Carol to apologize, but she was not available. Later in the afternoon he went to several meetings that Liz also attended, but he avoided looking at or speaking with her. He decided to leave the office early, despite the report his boss wanted completed by the next day.

On his way home he passed a lawn-and-garden shop. He stared at the window display, slick with vapor. Orchids, hibiscus and oleander gleamed, multifaceted as jewels. Before he and Carol had met he had gardened himself, and had often planted aconitum—monk's hood—or nereum—a kind of oleander, both of whose poison discouraged blackbirds and other creatures from raiding his garden. But he doubted if aconitum or nereum would work on a dog.

At his front doorstep Mike heard the TV on. That probably meant that Carol had brought Harry home during her lunch break—the dachshund was less lonely with the TV for company. But as Mike walked through the house (and called out his name) Harry could not be found.

Annoyed, he turned off the TV. He entered the kitchen, sat at the table, and gazed at the trees out the window. The dogwoods should bloom soon, he thought. They were hard-pressed to afford a house and yard so close to downtown; it was a shame not to keep a garden too. He then noticed in his pocket the crumbled travel brochure he earlier had read, and set it on the table, smoothing it out.

He heard the front door open. Carol—without the dog—entered the kitchen. She looked drawn and pale, and a few gray hairs were showing.

“Did you get my message?” he asked. She nodded. “Where’s Harry?”

“He got sick at work—”

“Again?”

“—and so I dropped him off at the vet’s. He has to stay overnight.”

“That must be one unhappy dachshund. What should we eat for dinner?”

“I don’t feel like cooking tonight.”

“I’ll cook.”

“I mean I don’t feel like eating.” She sat down across from him. “Have you thought about what I said?”

“You mean—what is it that I want from you?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t thought much. I don’t understand. Is the question some sort of puzzle, like a Zen koan?”

“I know what I want,” she said, her voice suddenly pitched high. She balled her fists, and a tear glistened on her cheek. “I’m thirty-five years old, Mike.”

“There’s still time.”

“I don’t want to wait!”

Her husband rose from the table. He left the kitchen and entered the bedroom. As he lay atop the unmade bed, he heard Carol begin to cry. Again he looked out the window. If it weren’t for Harry he could plant a garden. Or quit his job and take a long trip, to Aruba, the Antilles, or Malta. [1024]