

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #36 - April 1999

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Story Bytes

Very Short Stories
Lengths a Power of 2

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1 to 2 stories weekly via e-mail
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Back Issues (HTML)

Dating From March, 1996
<<http://www.storybytes.com/view-month/>>

Back Issues (PDF)

Dating From January, 1999
<<http://www.storybytes.com/view-pdf/>>

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**Story Bytes better
than sound bites.**

The Unhappiest Man Who Ever Lived

M. Stanley Buben

“**F**orgive? Never!” [2]

Farewell, Suburbia

Anne Leung

And there went the neighborhood. Why? I told you to rock the vote, eat less fat, work smarter not harder, exercise at least three times a week, pray but not at school, keep your elbows off the table, clean your room, send your children to private schools, lock your doors, sit down and shut up, look both ways, beware of THEM, smile and nod, be all that you can be, call me and we'll do lunch, buy American, get professional help, fill in the bubbles completely with a number 2 pencil, be seen not heard, seek your inner child, come see me today or I can't save you any money, avoid the Eastside, paint your house in pastel colors, and free Willy.

Just try to defy me again. [128]

For Kosovo!

M. Stanley Bubien

“The date, tell me the date!”

“T-t-today,” I said, hands clasped behind my back, hiding their trembling, as I concentrated upon the words. “Today i-is—”

“Not today,” our leader barked, “damn you! The da—” he fell into a fit of coughing, leaning front-wise upon the table, though it hardly bent under his form. His aid, and second-in-command, moved to intervene, but he waved the assistance aside.

We waited until the tremors in his body slackened, and he dropped, breathing wetly, into a chair.

“Thehhh...” he rasped in an attempt at speech, but shook his head. Clearing his throat several times, yet to no avail, he finally gestured to his aid.

“Our instructions for you are clear,” the aid lifted a pistol from the table. “You will be first in the line.”

“F-f-f-first?” I stammered. “Are-are you s-s-sure?”

“Absolutely! You are our most capable shot, and the automobile will pass first position the fastest.”

I nodded.

“Freedom for Kosovo!” the aid stated solemnly as he presented the fire-arm.

“F-f-f-reedom.” I replied, unclasping my hands slowly, but before bringing them forward, clenching my fingers into a fist. Yet that simply caused the whole of my forearm to tremble as I reached toward the pistol. I closed my eyes as I grasped it, but another palm, cold and clammy, laid itself upon mine.

“Unity!” our leader said, having found voice once more. “Won with the blood of their ‘fearless leader.’ Pah!” He spat on the floor. “Our hands are already blackened, but blood will pave our path. Are you up to this task?”

I stiffened, for to express doubt now would certainly mean my own death. “A l-l-land united for u-u-s and all Serbians, its r-r-rightful heirs.” I said, though my hand still shook.

At that moment, his grip tightened, the firmest grasp he had ever thrown upon me. “Ah! You are for the task! These aggressions will not abide, and

you, my friend, you will have the first opportunity to free our land from such treacheries.

“The instant that he dies, it will be for Kosovo. And his people—all people!—will know the Serbian wrath cannot be contained.”

The three of us stood there at that moment, each with a palm surrounding the pistol.

“The date, I ask again. The date?” our leader said in a tone that had earned him his post, though in contrast, he had become so pale, he seemed to fill the darkened room with a glow.

“Twenty-eighth, June,” I stated with perfect annunciation.

“In the year of our Lord 1914,” our leader continued. “Then, the Archduke Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne will fall.”

And as one voice we repeated our rallying cry. “For Kosovo! Union or death!”

They released the pistol, leaving it fully in my possession. They had finished with me, this I knew, and made my exit. I fled to the street, and falling against an alleyway wall, I held my hand before me. Through the moonless night I could not see it, but I knew that, still, it shook as though it would never stop. [512]

Salty, Uncomfortable Stains

M. Stanley Bubien

And I fled the service. The sunlight outside flash-blinded me, and I lifted a hand to block it. Squinting, hand still raised, I charged forward, tie flapping behind as I jogged toward the single oak which provided the sole shade upon the whole church-grounds.

There, against its bark, I fell, carelessly staining my slacks as I pulled knees to chest and buried head into arms.

When I had been within the crescendo of the building, “Jesus!” our pastor, Bob, had cried. “Jeeessuuuusss!” he’d repeated, drawling the name for impact, “is here! Yes! Right here! In our midst! Brethren!”

“Amens!” reigned with the Gospel choir’s rhythm; bodies swayed, many with arms outstretched, while still more flashed smiles as though the light of Christ beamed directly from their faces.

“Amen!” Pastor Bob echoed, throwing hands, fingers extended, heavenward. “Amen! He honors our song! He... Is... Here!”

And calls of “Preach it, brother!” and “Hallelujah!” followed. But Pastor Bob paused, bringing arms slowly down, lowering his voice. “What?” he whispered while the choir quieted to a hum. “What?” he gestured across the congregation, “are you to do? He’s here! The Lord, Jesus. Yes he is.” And his voice raised again. “Right in front of you! Each and every one!” And lower, “What will you say to Him?” And higher, “He’s here! Yes! Speak to Him, brother’s and sister! Tell Him your heart!”

He spun in a circle, and the choir erupted into song, carrying the congregation into a charismatic frenzy. And I felt it—a flushing in my cheeks, a heavy draw of breath, a skipping of heartbeat—physical sensation inspired only of the Spirit.

But that same Spirit revealed me—purely, wholly, honestly as I was—and I knew that Pastor Bob spoke Truth. Jesus was here. With a shout, like a naked man upon a stage, I covered my face, fingers digging into my brow. As the fellowship continued their praises, I too called aloud, but the words I spoke were those of Peter.

“Flee from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

The din drowned my voice.

I screamed again the decree, yet unable to hear even myself. Glancing across the swaying mass, a moment of logic manifested—in begging the Lord to flee from me, I also begged Him to flee from these, my Christian family. Impulse took over; I pushed down the aisle, rushed the doorway, and fled the service.

Yet, even here, shaded by the oak, I could hear their song, vibrating from the paper-thin walls of our humble building. I shifted my weight, trying not to listen as tears wet my forearms.

Hard and long I cried, oh, so very long, for a warmth eventually crept upon me. Lifting my head, I realized that the shade had moved aside and the sunlight beamed once more upon me. Wiping my nose, I gazed into its light—again flash-blinded, but rather than blocking the rays, I closed my eyes. And presently, I felt a tickling; for it was the trail of tears evaporating, leaving behind their salty, uncomfortable stains. [512]

The Snake Killing

Jerry Poyner

“Joe Ray Shaw was walking down the road with a snake wrapped around his arm,” James said.

“He ain’t afraid of snakes,” I said. “Granny says he is crazy. She said his momma was marked when he was born.”

“How did he get marked?” James asked.

“I think she stepped on a snake when she was in the family way,” I proudly told James. Usually James was telling me things.

“Granny said she knew he was crazy, because he plays with snakes,” I said. “She said if he is walking down the road with a snake, we are supposed to come in the house and hide.”

“What if he comes in the house?” James said.

“Granny will shoot him with her shotgun. She loaded it the other day when he come up that driveway,” I said.

“Wanna go play on the big swing?” James asked.

“Nah. Let’s go over to Granny’s and see if that crazy Joe Ray Shaw has been over there with his snakes.”

The walk to Granny’s house was a far piece for two young, barefoot boys, but there was little traffic to worry about and sometimes, honking Jack would come by and give you a ride. Taking off down the dirt road, my cousin James said he had decided to be a preacher when he grew up. “Why do you want to be a preacher?” I wanted to know.

“Cause if you are a preacher, you only work one day a week and then you get to eat with Granny. You see preachers are called by God and since God likes them, they don’t have to work,” James explained.

“Has God called you to preach?” I asked.

“I got saved last month at the brush harbor revival,” James said. “When you get saved and if you don’t do any sinning, God will call you to preach,” he very smugly announced. “I ain’t cussed or smoked since I got saved. I’m going to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and save everybody.”

“Think you can save that crazy Joe Ray Shaw?” I asked.

“Not if he keeps playing with them durned snakes. Snakes are bad. The

devil is in them snakes. It is in the bible,” James said.

Granny’s old house was sitting off the road about a half mile up on the side of a hill. We took off through the cow pasture for a shortcut. The little cow path was hard packed and there was no chance of stepping on a snake on that path. Sometimes you would see one but it was easy to turn around and go back the other way.

“I’m going to be a preacher too,” I decided right then.

“You ain’t been saved. You’re going to hell,” James said.

“How do you get saved?” I asked.

“Well you got to go to a revival and when they sing the invitation you got to go front and tell the preacher you want to be saved,” James explained.

“Is that all you got to do?” I asked.

“Nope, you got to cry. Every time somebody gets saved, they cry and cry. That tells God you are sorry for all your sins. You can’t even go up front unless you feel like crying,” James said. He continued, “you ain’t ever been saved because you ain’t felt like crying.”

By this time we were at Granny’s front door so the getting saved talk had to end. Granny heard us coming up the driveway and came out on the porch. She was a little woman, maybe 5’1" and maybe she weighed a 100 pounds, but she was the boss of the family and nobody in the neighborhood crossed her. She had the gift of gab and ever since she had gotten her party line, she knew every thing that was going on for two mile around.

“Granny, has that crazy Joe Ray Shaw been over here?”

“No way he’s gonna come over here. I told that momma of his to keep him away from here if she didn’t want him shot,” Granny said with a spit of snuff juice. “I ain’t going to have nobody around here that plays with snakes.”

“Joe Ray said that his snake wasn’t poison,” I said.

Granny got that look on her face that told me I had just said the wrong thing. “NOW YOU LISTEN TO ME! All snakes are poison and there are many a youngen laid out in the Klondike cemetery, that have been bit by them. Why, if one just barely nicks your finger, you’ll swell up like a balloon and then your face will turn purple and then you are as good as dead. God made them snakes poison to keep us from wandering off all over the durn place and getting in trouble. You kids leave that crazy Joe Ray Shaw alone and stay away from them places where the snakes hide.”

Sensing my feelings were a little hurt, Granny said, “now you two come

on up on the porch and I'll fix you a vanilla shake." The vanilla shake consisted of a spoon full of sugar, a dash of vanilla flavoring, and a glass of milk out of the dug well. On a hot summer afternoon, nothing tasted better than Granny's vanilla shakes.

Anxious to get back to asking about being saved at the Baptist revival, I told James, I had to get on home.

James was through talking about being saved. He had snakes on his mind. "Granny told me one time that she knew a family that had a house back over behind the little pond," he said. "One night they went to bed and they left the front door open and a whole herd of snake slipped in through the door and bit and killed everyone of them. They never got up out of bed."

"Granny was just telling you a scary story. My momma said that didn't happen. She said Granny makes up stories just to scare us kids," I pleaded.

"Well I ain't going to the little pond anymore," James said. "I'll walk 10 miles around that place cause it is full of snakes."

The trip home was filled with great fear. What if we stepped on a snake and it just nicked our toes. We'd swell up and die. Ever step was made with eyes open and on the road. I wasn't in the mood to get saved anymore. I just wanted to get home alive before a snake jumped out at me or James.

When we got to my house I told James bye and I went inside where it was safe. I didn't sleep very well that night and I dreamed about snakes and that crazy Joe Ray. In my dream he was chasing me and he had a snake wrapped around his arm. I would try to run and I couldn't get my legs to move. I woke up crying a little and I wondered if that meant I was saved. I decided to ask James if that was good enough the next day.

The next day, I headed to James' house to see if he was still scared of Joe Ray and to tell him about crying.

When I got to his house, he was outside cutting a board with his dad's hatchet. "Whatcha doing James?"

"I'm whittling a snake killing stick. See, it's got a big end here and I'm sharpening it so I can kill snakes if'n we see some today."

The device looked pretty functional to me. He had nailed a piece of tin on the edge so that it looked a lot like a knife. "I want one too!" I said. We spent the next two hours building me a snake killer and although mine wasn't quiet as good as his, it was longer so I didn't have to get as close as him to kill a snake.

After we got our snake killers made, James made a bold suggestion. “Let’s go over to Joe Ray’s house and kill some snakes.”

That made a lot sense to me, since he was the snake man that everyone hated and we had our snake killers. We grew about 10 inches taller with them snake killers in our hands. Heck we weren’t ever afraid of Joe Ray Shaw, the craziest kid on our mile of road.

On the way to Joe Ray’s house, which was about a half mile west of our house, James kept demonstrating how to use the snake killer. He would stop right on the road and say, “see, if that was a snake laying there,” pointing to a dead stick poking out of the grass, “I’d just hit it right behind the head and then the durn thing would be dead.” Then he would wham that old dead stick and break it right into.

About half way on our journey, I told James about dreaming about Joe Ray and snakes and waking up crying. I asked him, “am I saved like you are now?”

“Nope, you got to do it at a revival,” he said with authority of someone who is already saved.

“They won’t have one until next year and I might get bit by a durned snake and die before then,” I said.

“You’ll go to hell if you do,” he said with satisfaction. James like to be superior to others and knowing that he was already saved, and that there wasn’t any way I could get saved until next summer gave him that place of importance he always enjoyed with me.

“Have you cussed since you was saved?” I asked him. Then I remembered hearing the grownups talking about cussing. “I heard if you even think in your head a cuss word, you will go to hell. Is that true?”

“If you think a cuss word, it is the same as saying it,” James said. “I haven’t even thought a cuss word since I was saved at the revival.”

“Boy, I think cuss words all the time. I hope I get saved real soon so I can stop thinking cuss words,” I confessed.

“Yep, when you get saved, you don’t even think cuss words. I ain’t even stole a cigarette since I was saved. I did have a dip of Granny’s two dot Garrett snuff. Dipping snuff ain’t a sin, cause they did that in the bible.”

As we approached Joe Ray’s house, I began to get real nervous. What if Joe Ray had a snake wrapped around his arm. I couldn’t hit the snake on his arm, cause Joe Ray was older and a lot bigger than me.

Joe Ray was home and he saw us coming up the drive way. He met us half way and said “What you’ all doing with them sticks?”

“Just out killing snakes,” James said. “You got any snakes that need killing?”

“Just in the barn,” Joe Ray said. “There are lots of snakes in the barn. You’ all go on out to the barn and kill all the snakes you want to kill. I’ ll be out there directly.”

Now at this point, I was ready to head back home, but James had worked up a fever for killing a snake. There wasn’t any turning him back now. We went to the barn and it was the usual mid-summer barn. There was a good bit of hay stored and room for another load or so. James started poking around looking for snakes and I stood way behind him, ready to enter the battle if I needed to save his life or something.

Joe Ray had sneaked up the tree beside the barn and had crawled into the little loft. He was a heck of lot quieter than James and my heart beat, so we didn’t know he was anywhere around. He very quietly dropped his pet bull snake down on the back of James’ neck. The sight of the snake falling down on James turned me toward home, yelling for someone to help us. James was right behind me, yelling goddamn it, goddamn it, goddamn it, over and over and over.

About half way home. We stopped running, completely out of breath.

James, finally catching his breath, said, “now, I ain’t never going to be a goddamned preacher.” [2048]