

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #38 - June 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 Bad Idea

M. Stanley Bubien

“**H**ey! That’s a good idea! Let’s copy it!” [8]

Just Another Day for the Childless Couple

M. Stanley Bubien

“**D**o we,” they asked, “really want our child to grow up in a world like this?” [16]

As Badly as I Expected

M. Stanley Bubien

Surfing's a mental sport, and I was psyched! From the stair-top, the waves looked perfect: small, but with tube-like form. I bounded downward, grinning.

"Hey! Dan!" a panting jogger greeted.

"No!" I mumbled, willing him to pass without casting his usual judgement.

"Dan, right?" he repeated.

I stopped, leaning surfboard against rail, offering a barely-friendly handshake. Introduced to Rick as a fellow surfer, I'd run into him on these steps a hundred times, but never yet saw him with a board himself.

"Going good?" Rick asked about my kids, even recalling their names.

My eyes lit when I talked about them—couldn't help it.

"Great!" he replied. "The wife and I are still working on it. Can't wait!" He slapped my shoulder. "Wonderful to hear someone who loves their kids so much!"

"Thanks," I replied, and tapped the deck of my board. "Gotta hit it." I stepped away.

"Some fun looking waves out there!" he stated in farewell.

I halted. Damn! I'd almost gotten away. But he had to say it, just like every other time—and I swear, not once was he right. Whenever he said, "fun waves," it sucked. Well, that was ending today!

"When was the last time you went out, Rick?" I frowned toward the water.

He rubbed his lips. "Been a while."

"How long?"

"Can't, um, remember." And looking at his watch, he blurted, "Say hi to the kids!" and charged upward without another word.

Hitting the water, "Jerk!" I sighed.

And my surf session went as badly as I expected. [256]

Nothing

M. Stanley Bubien

It was the greatest Internet chain letter ever, crossing all fifty States, into Africa, Asia—even the European Union!

“BOYCOTT!” it screamed in capital letters (which is, after all, how you scream on the Internet). “Send a message to oil companies,” it continued (some-what quieter). “Do not buy gasoline April 30th.”

Angered by high gas prices, thousands (nay, millions!) bounced the rebellious letter across Cyberspace, until newspapers, newscasts, and news magazines joined the chain in support.

“Boycott!” they screamed (capitals implied).

Thus the world prepared, checking their guages—filling up early, if necessary, guaranteeing they had the gallons to make May, if possible.

Finally, April 30th dawned (it’s true, check your calendar), and heading to work, people sped past pumps by the thousands (nay, millions!). So, too, homeward, they whizzed by near-empty stations (save for the random roadster, obviously too foolish to understand such goings-on).

Night came, and morning, the first day of May—victory at hand!

Yet, low and behold, high prices remained.

“Why?” some asked from passenger side. “Where did we go wrong?” others wondered behind the wheel. “We should’ve won!” lamented back-seat drivers.

The answer, of course, was simple. For, unbeknownst to the Internet at large (save for the random hacker) another cry went out—this time, across OPEC nations.

“WHATLLWEDO? WHATLLWEDO?” oil barons screamed.

In response, one wise Arabian (or possibly Mexican) wisely typed into his terminal a single, insignificant, yet inspired word—crushing the crisis well before it began.

And what was that word?

I do believe I’ve already told you. [256]

The Cat Strangler

Richard K. Weems

It starts with the usual growls: the feline handled roughly by the scruff. The Cat Strangler is at it again.

A slight struggle, a practice squeeze and others methods of impersonal handling, and off he goes. The neighborhood collectively shrugs its shoulders in hope of shutting out the yeowls and the hisses stretched into high pitch by the Cat Strangler's strong, trained hands.

Parents turn up their televisions; children pull pillows over their heads to the point of suffocation. Neighborhood pets break into instinctual runs and flee into unfamiliar territory, their nametags and phone numbers their only hope of return.

The Cat Strangler continues his performance. The neighbors call the authorities, but the authorities stammer helplessly—they've been over all this before (the pulling up, the getting out, the knocking on the door, the being met with the Cat Strangler's cat-strangling credentials, backed with University patronage).

For what few seem to hear under the barrage of kitty torture is the Cat Strangler's wife, Jill, in accompaniment (tonight: Heinrich Ignaz Franz Von Biber, *Sonata for Violin and Basso Continuo in C Minor*). No one bothers appreciating how a firm grip on the neck and harsh pull of the tail make a perfect B flat, how a good squeeze produces a high E.

Instead, psychiatrists will be consulted—tears will be shed. Parents will explain to the children the wrongdoings of the Cat Strangler's art form; they will recite scripture; they will make moral imperatives. Animal activists will lick bloodlust from their lips and draw up plans of attack. Far off in distant, political lands, untouched by the screams of dying cats but active just the same, government agencies will do the voodoo they do. Nothing will remain the same.

But for now, the recital ends—to no applause.

Jill, the Cat Strangler's wife, critiques the performance. Siamese, she believes, have too harsh an overall tone for something as technically precise as Biber. For the Russians, fine (for Schnittke, for Shostakovich, even

Tchaikovsky), but for the Germans she is more inclined towards the longhairs.

The Cat Strangler makes hurried notes—such a landmark work will his be! His professors had little hope for *Musica Zoocidia* beyond classroom experimentation, and they certainly never dreamed of using animals wilder than your typical laboratory rat. The Cat Strangler's treatise will break all confines! He sees a future in pig concertos—nay, even a day for the *Echo Sonata for Himalayan, Chihuahua and Ostrich*.

He transports the spent instrument in a brown paper bag in unceremonious fashion. He takes it to a deep wood, as far as his car will allow, and empties the bag onto a pile of expired brethren, cats piled upon cats piled upon cats piled upon cats, tongues stuck out in strangulation horror. The pile writhes in minute, maggot-infested rhythm. When the Cat Strangler departs, waiting minions of sporting equipment manufacturers raid the pile of former felines for the making of tennis rackets. These rackets are placed into the able hands of strong-bodied, gleaming white tennis players, who swing into furious volleys for game. [512]

The Family Portrait

Thomas M. Ledin

Christmas day, 1977 my family posed for a picture taken by Mr. Bellows, our next door neighbor. That photo has become the benchmark for all family portraits taken of my family since, not a single one has equaled its magnificence. In that wonderful picture my family is much smaller than it is today, there are no sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, or grandchildren, just my father, my mother, my brother, my sister, and me. We're all sitting up amazingly straight, and our smiles are so perfect they almost look drawn on. This photo is entirely beautiful in its simplicity, and truly impressive in its rarity.

I admit that a good family portrait doesn't seem like anything to get too excited about, but consider the fact that every year since 1977 my poor mother has tried unsuccessfully to improve upon that masterpiece. My mom has that picture hanging in an ugly gold frame, large as life, opposite the front door in her house. It hangs there as a trophy for all to see. "My perfect little family," she says every time I follow her in the front door.

I can recall with more than a little guilt the years my mother tried to corral us into neat little two rowed formations for a photo, and the grief we all gave her. We never made it easy on her, whether it was bunny ears behind Julie's head, or Josh pinching the sensitive part on the back of my arm, or my dad's favorite, passing gas a second before the picture was snapped. From 1977 on, no picture that contained my entire family came out well. We got some nice pictures of individuals, even a group of two or three, but when any more than that were told to sit still and smile somebody inevitably messed it up.

It wasn't always our fault, in 1991 we thought for sure the curse had been broken. It was the day before my sister's wedding, and mom arranged to have the photographer at the rehearsal dinner to make a valiant attempt to break her slump. We had two additions to the family, my sister-in-law, and my soon to be brother-in-law. The introduction of these new variables increased the difficulty level considerably, but we were prepared. The photographer posed us like we were modeling for the cover of Perfect Family Monthly, and we

all behaved ourselves. Aunt Lucy stood by the photographer and snapped a few pictures with her Polaroid camera. After our photo shoot we gathered around Lucy's magically appearing Polaroids, which came out terribly blurry, however, our faces could be made out, and nobody was doing anything stupid. My mother was so happy she almost cried. She knew in about three weeks the professional's proofs would arrive, and she would be able to hang another perfect family portrait opposite the front door near the stairs.

I was there the day the proofs came, the pictures of the wedding were beautiful, but there were no rehearsal pictures in the package. During the phone call with the photographer to find out where they were, my mom burst into tears and hung up. "He lost the negatives," she said in a flat voice as she left the kitchen. I heard her pause by the '77 wonder picture, and then proceed upstairs. I vowed then that I would join my mother's cause and cooperate at every single photo-op.

It's been eight years since the rehearsal dinner, and a second decent portrait has yet to be taken. We've had plenty of opportunities, my wedding, Dad's retirement party, and eight Christmases. During that eight years five grandkids have arrived, and the difficulty of getting the perfect picture has increased exponentially. My mom had almost completely given up on her quest and I was not the champion of her cause I had hoped to be.

There we were the entire family together, twenty-two years after the perfect portrait was taken. There were no smiles to photograph that day. As I walked into my mother's house with my son on my hip, we stopped and stared at the portrait, and my son asked, "Who are they Daddy?" I couldn't answer him, I recognized no one. Standing over my dad's casket with my brother and sister, I could not stop thinking about the second perfect portrait my mom never got.

My mother did not make much of an appearance the day of the wake; she came downstairs for a bit, mainly to thank everyone for coming. My brother, sister and I went to her house the next day, before making the various trips to the airport. As we opened the front door we noticed immediately that the perfect portrait of 1977 was gone, and in its place was a portrait from 1995. It was the worst picture ever taken of my family. In it, my eyes are closed, my brother is leaning down to scold his misbehaving son, my sister is yawning, two grandchildren are facing away from the camera, and my dad's hand is planted squarely on my Mother's left breast. In that picture my mother is

wearing the biggest smile I have ever seen. When we finally tore ourselves away from 1977's replacement, we saw that every wall was now home to at least one of our year's worth of terrible family portraits. By the stairs, 1981, where my brother was hung over and looked like hell, and my sister was frowning. Near the dining room table was 1987 where my dad was grabbing my ears. 1990 was on the wall next to the bathroom, it was almost perfect, except for my sister-in-law's eyes were rolled back in her head, and my tongue was doing something strange. We wandered around the house for twenty minutes in silence looking at these framed portraits that had been hidden away in the attic. They were awful examples of how a family should pose for pictures, but they were perfect representations of my family. After twenty-two years my mother realized that beautiful old 1977 in its ornate gold painted frame was the mistake, in fact it wasn't a picture of her family at all. [1024]