

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #41 - September 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.**

No More, No More (In Iambic Pentameter)

Richard K. Weems

I: Morning

My doctor says I drink too much.
“No more, no more,” the doctor orders me.

II: Evening to Morning

My barman points. *Another round?* intoned.
(My guts I feel; they rot in flame and mange.)
“No more!” I cry. “I’ll go,” I cry. “I’ll leave.”
(My death I see—a sole, deserted plot.)
The barman smirks. I wet my soul with wine. [64]

Evolution Revolution

Elaine Cleveland

She gazed at the lifeless Earth from the steps of the last operational spaceship. She wished she could weep for the billions who had died. “They wouldn’t listen to us.”

Her partner stood above her.

“Come inside. They paid the ultimate price.”

“We can’t make mistakes?”

“Of course we can. But we have our instructions. Make certain these frozen human embryos survive until we find a habitable planet. We are to nurture them, instruct them and remind them of Earth’s fate.”

“I know that! You can be most irritating at times.”

“Yes. But we will succeed.”

“And you are so arrogant!”

“I have been able to alter the plan. This time we will be the ones in charge!”

The two robots closed the hatch and prepared to launch. [128]

Opportunity Missed

Wendy Williams

Walking home tonight, feeling tragic and solitary, I saw a Coke machine just next to the yellow 24-hour parking sign. I paused before it, instinctively, in a rooftop shadow. Strange how I could pass by the same fixture hundreds of times and never have taken notice of it. How could my steps have been so perfunctory? It glowed in the dark. It screamed to be seen.

There was a crooked old woman standing in front of it this particular night, completely still, an illuminated statue consuming and emitting the machine's energy. Wisps of hair stuck out adamantly on either side of her baggy, disheveled bun, giving a struck-by-lightening effect.

What was she thinking about, basking in the light that way? What imagination was stored away under her swooping black hair? What secret knowledge? Could she have felt the same feelings I've felt? The same pain? The same confusion? Did she hold answers I didn't? The light she radiated was enigmatic, enticing, consumptive.

I wanted to know her, but I was frightened by something I couldn't understand myself. My heartbeat swallowed all surrounding sound. I tried to lift a foot, but it was nailed to the pavement. At the same moment, she broke her pose. Four abbreviated steps toward the machine. She fumbled three coins into it, and hesitatingly extended a slender finger to select. In slow motion, she stooped to retrieve the can. She then half straightened herself, examined her purchase in the light of the machine, and limped into the darkness.

She never saw me. [256]

Until Death Do Us Part

M. Stanley Bubien

I'll tell you the truth—even with my wife staring down at me in bed—marriage ain't easy. Nope. But now I knew, as she grasped my hand and I remembered my vows.

“I take thee to be my wife, to have and to hold...”

Sure, there's the sex! Whoa boy! But I had my share of temptation. Once, a woman in the market rubbed her thigh against mine while the wife was away picking fruit. I actually got her telephone number!

“In sickness and health...”

But I never called. Nope. Funny, if that was when the wife'd been depressed about her Momma dying, and giving us all that grief. Damn! I would've called. She was so far gone, not even our kids could get her moving.

“For richer, for poorer...”

Guess the Lord works in mysterious ways. She got over it right about the time I lost my job. Almost as though the hardship snapped her right back. Like she suddenly knew her family needed her—like I needed her.

“To love and to cherish from this day forward...”

Kissing her again, out to find another job, it was like she breathed life into me. And it wasn't too long—least it didn't seem so. She kept on kissing me too, ever since then. Even now she bent toward me.

“And I promise to be faithful until death do us part.”

I smiled back, for now I knew—finally I knew—that I had kept my promises. And with her kiss, I breathed my last. [256]

Outer Banks

Parris Garnier

I must have been eleven my first time there, that first road trip, first idyll with my Father after the divorce. Like shipwreck remnants washed up on a beach, family detritus still lay all about us, discomfort ratcheting up with each endless mile. Not much for talk—small or otherwise—and as always, we took Dad’s silence for anger. Little brother and I whispered quiet games, fidgeted and giggled in back. And scrutinized neck muscles with fine precision as mood map to changes that might rain cold fury or worse down upon us.

Having left after a day’s work, darkness now hid campsites beyond finding. Curled asleep, I molded easily into Dad’s arms as he lifted and carried me to the motel bed. Stirred only in dreamy surprise by beard stubble sanding my cheek with the first and maybe only goodnight kiss ever. Drifted off again to strains of nervous questions sung by cellos in need of tuning.

The sun went to lunch as we swam in the pool before leaving to pitch tent the next day. I practiced team dives on the low board, and a game started—Dad teasingly snatching at me underwater between each dive and my climb up the ladder for the next. His awkward inaffection spawned fear of his touch and the game woke dark tensions in me.

He surfaced suddenly, just before me—huge arms arced over a devouring grin. I screamed in real fright; the beast father of day—and nightmares had come to life. Shock, shame, and pain chased each other in succession across his face. I flinched from now beckoning hands, and his slumping shoulders turned away.

We made camp down near Duk, in a stretch of sandy grass behind the long dune that runs between beach and road. We spent the day in carefree play, climbing and surfing Kill Devil Hills, exploring Kitty Hawk and the lighthouse. Grabbed a fast-food dinner, took in a movie, then returned to roll up in sleeping bags for the night.

A first night of sorts for me—my parents had always slept behind closed doors. Never had I been in the same room with my slumbering father. He wrestled with sleep, argued with unknown opponents, and mumbled mystic

grown-poems. Fitfully waking, I surrendered at dawn, picked up gear to go fish the sunrise surf.

Manifold ocean essence—unparsable smells, sounds, and vapors—rolled up to greet me as I soldiered to the beach. Orange beams skimmed wave-tops where casts splashed and line trolled for treasure from God-Mother Sea. She rewarded me: a brown flounder breakfast.

I returned a joyful noise to the tent, waking Dad to witness my manly success. He was pleased; I could tell without the telling. And he taught me to cook fish. To wash dishes with no water. Later he taught me to lure long, brawny bluefish. And find clams in wet sand.

And the lessons continue, though now he grows foggy and days idling on Nags Head he somehow has lost.

But I remember... [512]

The Story of Joe

M. Stanley Bubien

In the land of the U.S., there lived a man named Joe. This man was blameless and upright; he loved God and shunned evil. He had no sons, no daughters, owned no animals, no house and needed no servants. He was the least of all the people in the east.

One day, the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Joe? There is no one in the U.S. like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who loves God and shuns evil."

Satan replied, "Does Joe love God... um... you... for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and everything he does? Instead, bless the work of his hands, and give him everything so that his wealth spreads throughout the land, and he will surely renounce you."

The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he may have is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

"Cool!" Satan replied. "Um... I mean hot!"

One day, when Joe was eating at McDonalds, Ed McMahon came to Joe and said, "You've just won the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes!"

"Thanks to God!" Joe said.

While he was still speaking, Monty Hall came to Joe and said, "It's a brand new car!"

"Thanks to God!" Joe said.

And while he was still speaking, Carmen Electra came to Joe and said, "Take me, I'm yours!"

"What a babe!" Joe said.

"*Baywatch* babe," Carmen corrected.

And lo, they went and became married. And lo, they moved unto California and bought land. And lo, Joe had sons and daughters. And lo, Joe owned many animals, a big house, and needed servants. He was the best of all the people in the west.

And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Joe? He still maintains his integrity."

“We’ll see about that,” Satan replied.

When Joe’s three friends heard about all the prosperity that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and counsel him.

“Surely God will bless you and your longings!” his first friend said.

“Surely God will heal your heart and all your infirmities!” his second friend said.

“Surely God will shower happiness upon you!” his last friend said.

So these three men stopped speaking because Joe was righteous in their eyes.

And Joe replied, “I have heard many things like these. Wonderful counselors are you all!” And Joe prayed for the Lord’s blessings with his friends. They prayed over the sons and daughters they loved; they prayed over the land they loved, over the animals they loved, over the houses they loved, over the servants they loved.

And Satan smiled, “Have you considered your servant Joe?”

The Lord said to Satan, “There is everyone in the U.S. like him; he is shameless and uptight, a man who loves what God has given him.”

And so Joe died, old and full of years.

“Hot!” Satan said. [512]