

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #42 - October 1999

Table of Contents

Issue #42 - October, 1999

2 WORD STORIES

- The Gravestone Over the Last Tree on Earth**
M. Stanley Bubien <bubien@storybytes.com> 3
Such a complex issue, broken down to basics.

256 WORD STORIES

- On Being Watched**
Victoria Arico <varico@jlc.net> 4
How many animist pianist have you met?

- The Big Blue Shirt**
Lorraine Gregoire <friedel@v-wave.com> 5
Watchers watch for many different reasons.

- My Best Friend Died Last Week**
M. Stanley Bubien <bubien@storybytes.com> 6
Taken from the funeral of Stanley Kubrick.

512 WORD STORIES

- Calendars of Lost Time**
Ahmed Mokhtar <ahmed_mokhtar36@excite.com> ... 7
A fable about fatherhood.

- The Way to a Horse's Heart**
M. Stanley Bubien <bubien@storybytes.com> 9
We always have priorities of some sort or another.

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories
Lengths a Power of 2

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**Story Bytes better
than sound bites.**

The Gravestone Over the Last Tree on Earth

M. Stanley Bubien

Simple economics. [2]

On Being Watched

Victoria Arico

She arrives alone. Her coach, our interpreter, delayed by storms, leaves us three to toss our languages across a canyon.

In one week she'll compete at Symphony Hall. Twenty years old, a celebrity of her island nation. Leo and I are her volunteer parents with a baby grand and a room for rent where she unpacks her animist religion, a shrine of rocks on the dresser top. But downstairs she freezes at the brim of the music room, eyes wide to the pine planks. She's unwilling to meet the instrument until another day has passed.

When she steps toward the piano at last, she avoids the knots like a child in a sidewalk game. Her music is clutter, the sound of a biker avoiding the pedals. She's spooked.

One morning I see her kneeling, the scores face-down about the room as if tossed by wind. We gather the scattered staves, unspeaking. I leave her seated stiff-backed as a Shaker, not sure she is grateful.

But after three days of tension she quits waiting for the coach. She talks to the wall and bows to the room. Then fluent as bird song she blooms, strikes lightning chords and breaks the dawn.

At the competition her flawless passion earns her a spot with the Boston Pops. "We'll work on your stage fright," the coach says, present at last. But this girl for whom spirits haunt all things explains with a triumphant smile: those people will not daunt her more than the thousand eyes in our wide pine floor. [256]

The Big Blue Shirt

Lorraine Gregoire

She was not what anyone would call pretty. The face was sad, pixie-like. Blonde curly bits attempted scraggly escapes from beneath the beat up baseball cap. She sat, thin shoulders hunched like she was trying to hide the girly parts beneath that big blue shirt. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I feared she would disappear into the caverns of the mega-mall where I had first begun to follow her.

Now, perched across from her at the crowded coffee bar, I sipped my latte—peeking upwards and sideways though wary eyelashes so watching would not be obvious. Had she been warned about not speaking to strangers? Should I risk it? Would she make a scene? How much should I offer her?

I caught the eye of a matron. She pursed her lips and gave me the squinty-eyed “I don't approve of you pervert types” glare. Then, the girl spoke first, “Mister, can I bum a smoke?”

My chance. I had to be tactful. “Sure,” I mumbled. “But first I have to ask you a question?” I breathed deeply. “That blue shirt you're wearing... did you, ah, get it at the Salvation Army?”

Her eyes widened. The thin neck snapped back as if smacked by the poverty police. Before she could scream or run away I blurted, “It was mine, a favorite—won it bowling. See, my name, Chuck, on the sleeve. My wife, she accidentally donated it. I would really like to buy it back.” [256]

My Best Friend Died Last Week

M. Stanley Bubien

My best friend died last week. The funeral, today. I recall removing my rain coat as the priest sprinkled holy water over the grave. But everything was soaked already, chairs, flowers, grass—even the dirt. More water? Unnecessary. I clenched my fists with each shake of the spatula.

People spoke, lots of them, as if they knew him. I heard nothing—not worth remembering. When it came my turn, my name stated from the grave head, I held up my palm, unable to pull my mouth into more than a thin, red line. A gust of wind blew. Those around me bunched their jackets about them as I steeled forearms beneath useless cotton sleeves, and the next speaker took his place.

Mulling after the ceremony felt surreal. Like a movie, and we were the background actors, the extras, filling frame-space to give a sense of realism. Ironic. I pinched my cheeks with a black glove.

At the car, I reached into my coat for the keys. Not there. I had left it, draped over a chair. “Be right back,” I mumbled, though the auto could not hear.

Halting at the edge of the makeshift tent, I noted my coat. Beside the grave, however, three men shoveled soil onto the casket. Peculiar looking fellows, smoking and dressed in morning coats, sharing stories between breaths like real chums.

Jesus, I thought. This is what it’s come to. Three strangers dumping dirt on him.

The earth fell, and I remained still, even as rain pattered again upon the tent. [256]

Thanks to Matthew Modine and James B. Harris.

Calendars of Lost Time

Ahmed Mokhtar

He could not open the car's door. It was his wedding day, and, only a few minutes ago, he had helped his bride into it and returned to bring their luggage, but when he came back he could not find the car keys. She looked at him in wonder, but he signaled to her not to worry, and went back to the house to look for them there.

When he came back to tell her that he could not find them, they had their first baby. His wife was so happy when she saw him, but her happy look soon changed into a reproachful one when he signaled to her that he could not find those keys. She held the baby girl close to the car window for him to look at. Then she was busy breastfeeding her. She signaled to him to try and get into the car so they could eat together. He went searching on the stairways and in the street. The search and the darkness exhausted him. When he came back, they were both asleep. He decided to wait till the morning to start searching again.

The next day, despite his daylight search, he still could not find the keys. He looked at them through the glass. His daughter was playing on the back seat, and his wife was busy doing something else. In the beginning he could not make out what it was, but when he brought his eyes closer to the glass he saw that they had just had their second baby. The mother just breastfed her, and started combing the elder daughter's hair, which has grown long. The mother smiled when she noticed him, signaled, inquiring about the keys, then resumed combing her daughter's hair.

On the third day came his third girl.

On the fourth day they did not feel his presence until he knocked on the car window's glass. The two elder girls were whispering to each other while secretly peeking at the two cars parked in front of them. He noticed the pair of young men in those two cars. The girls were a little startled when their younger sister shouted, happily recognizing him, but their blush soon disappeared when they remembered who he was.

On the fifth day he noticed another car. He found an auto tinker and brought him to open the door of the car in which the mother sat alone, staring

absent-mindedly at the three cars parked in front of her. Inside each of them, one of the girls sat with a young man of her age. The men looked strange to him, but they all greeted him cordially. He noticed that his youngest girl was crying. He signaled to her, asking about the reason for her tears. She pointed to her mother's car.

And when the auto tinker opened the door of the mother's car there was no one inside. While the other three cars were getting ready to leave, he found his wife's handbag. He eagerly opened it and started looking for the girls' names. [512]

The Way to a Horse's Heart

M. Stanley Bubien

I don't know why I did it. I think it was just plain stupidity. That's how I remember it anyway.

"She's so cute," I told Dave Schneider as we leaned on our mountain bikes, watching the horse-trail entrance. "Especially riding her horse."

Dave wasn't my best friend, but because we lived in the country, he was my only one.

"You love her," Dave chided. "And you've never talked to her!"

"I know her name!" I almost sighed when I said it, "Gabrielle. Awesome!"

"Heh," he chuckled. And I think he would've made fun of me more, but the thunder of hooves interrupted him. Instinctively, we split, and a Thoroughbred bolted from the trail and onto the road.

It clopped away, riderless.

"That's Gabrielle's!" I cried, and pedalled after.

Horses are fast. Really fast! That's something I never completely realized until then, puffing up the hill as hard as I could. I did know a few things though—I had worked at the local Rider's Club—like that when they're spooked, horses eventually gallop it off.

My lungs hurt by the time I finally saw Nadia, Gabrielle's Thoroughbred, sauntering along the roadside. I dropped my mountain bike and grabbed a handful of the long, dry grass sprouting about like weeds.

I approached Nadia—not quietly, but steadily, so she knew I posed no threat. She shook her head and her reins scraped the ground. Slowly, I lifted the handful of grass. "Nadia," I mumbled. "Here you go."

She looked.

I kept the grass raised, and continued calling in a soothing voice. Nadia took a few tentative steps, nodded and blew through her nose. I soon had her eating out of my hand as I caressed her muzzle. Fortunately, the Riding Club had also taught me the way to horse's heart—through its stomach!

With reins in hand, I lead her down the road, passing my mountain bike with a pang. Sure, this was the country, but that didn't protect an unlocked

bicycle—and a new one at that! Hurrying a bit more, I caught sight of Dave jogging toward us.

“Hey!” I said, with a glance back and a sigh of relief. “Here. Take Nadia. I gotta get my bike.”

I placed the reins into his reluctant grasp. “She won’t bolt, don’t worry. Here’s some grass to keep her calm.”

Walking to my bike took longer than I expected, but I was too tired to run. I even coasted it down the hill.

I spotted Dave handing Nadia to Gabrielle, and skidded to a stop. The wind carried Dave’s voice over. “No problem,” he said with a grin. Eyes wide, I cranked the pedals and rushed at him, but seeing Gabrielle’s reaction, I jerked and crashed into a bush.

Laying in the sage, the sight still haunted me. Gabrielle had kissed Dave—right on the mouth! I brushed twigs aside and watched them leaving together. That’s when I felt the full impact of my mistake.

Face in the dirt, I knew one thing for sure—I’d never go mountain biking with Dave again! [512]