

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #44 - December 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 Half-Truth

M. Stanley Bubien

“**T**he world is full of complete idiots, and I sure as hell ain’t one of ‘em!” [16]

The Most Sinful Man in the World

M. Stanley Bubien

His alarm blared. Not a particularly annoying sound in and of itself, but the fact that it was designed to wake him made all the difference. He fumbled for the button. It clicked and he rolled over. Four minutes later, the blaring returned.

The shower felt good. Water worked a sort of magic for him, washing him awake. Sometimes, he'd just stand there, staring into the stream, letting it run off his face. On better days, he found himself humming a tune as he soaped down—often a favorite song, or something he heard the night before.

He sniffed the coffee. Fresh ground! One of his favorite scents in the world. It was funny how coffee never tasted as good as it smelled—he still enjoyed it, mind you—but it was just one of those perplexing things, a great mystery of life as it were.

The newspaper flapped as he gobbled down his eggs and crunched at his toast. Though not a particular problem for him, he still watched his cholesterol anyway, only allowing himself the pleasure of an omelette a few times per week.

Upon dropping his plate and mug into the dishwasher, he glanced at his watch. Early today. He smiled. With briefcase in one hand, and gym bag in the other, he elbowed the garage door opener, and slid into the front seat. The car started right away.

After letting it warm up briefly, he revved the engine, slipped into gear, and steered toward the burden and beauty of a new day. [256]

Sitting Still

W.H. Merkle

They both loved that first R.E.M. album. She went out with him after he wrote that song that sounded like “Radio Free Europe,” slept with him after he pilfered “Talk About the Passion.” They danced to “Perfect Circle” at their wedding. Music had always been a tool of seduction for him.

Then his day jobs became more serious, the gigs less frequent. He was too derivative for his own good. His drummer climbed the masthead of a New York magazine, his bassist grew happy with fat and fatherhood. You never write me songs anymore, she once said, and he just smiled and put his headphones back on.

After their second child, he mounted several comebacks by experimenting with different forms. She tried valiantly to tolerate these dalliances. The first one sounded like The Smiths, she thought: whiny and brooding. The next one was industrial and just plain stupid: people who screamed to a beat-box were a dime a dozen. Then there was his Pearl Jam phase, which she hated: too self-absorbed and pretentious. When all was said and done, he decided to return to what was most comfortable.

One afternoon, she dropped the day’s mail in his lap to get his attention. He didn’t remove the headphones or look up from his tape machine, eager to finish and play her this new song that sounded like R.E.M.’s “Sitting Still.” Another two hours, he said, and it would be finished. Just long enough for her and the kids to be long gone, somewhere west of the fields. [256]

How I Got Started A Lifer's Story

Michael Ross Stiteler

“**H**ow did you get started?” my cellmate asked. They always ask, eventually.

“Well, I’ll tell you the short version,” I replied.

I met Johnny when I was eleven and he was sixteen. Mom was marrying his dad, Big John Triplett, a leftover cowboy born 100 years too late. We were driving through National City on our way to Big John’s trailer and spotted Johnny on a corner. He staggered over and squinted through the open window of Mom’s ’66 Plymouth. He was obviously drunk. His face was terribly pockmarked with neglected acne, and his eyes were ruby red slits.

“Michael, Johnny’s going to take you and your sister to Louisiana on the Trailways bus,” Mom said.

I won’t tell you about the adventures on the bus. About the time I lost my ticket somewhere in Texas and Johnny decided we’d hitchhike the rest of the way. About the crazy, high-voiced man who pissed out the window on passing cars and carried a small revolver in his pocket. We’d tickle his nose as he tried to sleep in those unbearable seats. “Goddddddddddddddd damn iiiiiiiiiiiit,” he’d squeal in his shrill, nasal voice, then reach into his pocket and flash the revolver. I’ll skip the fact that all we ate was a bucket of fried chicken we bought before we left, and it was a three day trip. I won’t mention Johnny and another guy robbing four liquor stores along the way, or sleeping over the seats in the baggage compartment.

But I will tell you this.

Not long after we moved to Minden we started roaming the streets at night. Big John and Mom would go drinking and dancing till two or three in the morning, so we were always on our own. One night, Johnny and I walked through a grassy field at Minden High School, home of the Crimson Tide. It was beautiful, with the moon shining bright. I really enjoyed hanging out with my new big brother, even though he was a liar and a thief and did drugs.

“Pull the fire alarm,” Johnny said casually.

“No way,” I laughed.

“Pull the fire alarm or you’re dead meat, you little jerk!”

“No,” I whispered, feeling a little uncomfortable with his tone of voice. Could he be serious? I was a good kid. I’d never broken the law.

“Mike, pull the fire alarm *now* or I’ll beat the crap out of you!”

“No way!”

I started to run. But an 11 year old is no match for a well muscled 16 year old. Johnny caught up with me and tripped me from behind, cutting my right shin with a well-placed kick.

Towering over me he said again, very deliberately, “Pull the alarm now, goddammit!”

I lay there weeping, hating Louisiana, hating my new life, wondering why Mom ever married Big John, wondering how Johnny could be such an ass, wondering what to do next.

“And that’s how I got started,” I told my cellmate.

“Did you pull the fire alarm?” he asked.

“That’s the stupidest question I’ve ever heard in my life.” [512]

Endangered Species

Robert Kerr-Doiren

Starr Chichester stopped on the narrow staircase, abruptly, and smiled. For perhaps the first time in her life, certainly the first time since she was a girl, the tatty poster on the concrete wall caught her attention. There were so many of these posters about, all of them variations on a theme, and they had been in place for so many years now, that they tended to blur into the background. Virtually every bare wall, light-post and community noticeboard still carried at least one of them—although the electronic monitors and screens had given up the advertisements on the subject long since. Everyone thought them redundant. The sole reason the posters themselves survived was that no one could be bothered to remove them. This particular one read: “A Proven Health Risk,” and some hand, most probably feminine, had sketched a pair of hornrimmed glasses and dotted in two crossed eyes over the stylized testicles adjoined to the threateningly erect penis.

Chuckling, and wondering idly how many years had elapsed since the vandalism, Starr reached out and traced a long vertical tear in the poster. Of course she should report him. It was a simple enough matter to do. One press of the correct icon, in any public booth. The “Ministry Of Health And The Family” would follow up sharpish and no mistake. She could do it anonymously.

But it had been fun, such fun...

Right up to the moment of revelation, as it were, she had been perplexed by his reluctance. He was a handsome enough young male, after all, tall and slim and obviously fit. And she had all the correct apparatus.

Yet he had resisted. Why?

What had interested her initially was the sheer absence of rumours. Quite simply, no one, not a single female in the Department, seemed to have slept with him. As it was inconceivable that anyone should have, and the word not spread, “it followed as the night the day”—who wrote that? some male long forgotten, and no doubt best left so—that the event in question had not taken place.

Never able to resist a challenge, a trait listed as both a fault and a strength,

depending upon which Supervisor was preparing her Annual Fitness Report that year, she had set out to correct the situation. Nor was he resistant to her efforts. Quite the contrary, he had proven an amusing and intelligent companion. They shared several interests even.

So why?

Earlier that evening, she had decided to roll the dice, once and for all. She would never forget the expression on his face when she emerged from the bathroom, entered the main room, and planted herself in front of the wallscreen—stark naked.

What had surprised her most was the clear terror on his handsome face. For one dreadful instant, she feared she had made an humiliating error, that he was in fact a Gay: albeit an undeclared one. Although why anyone in this day and age should not Declare their gender preference was unfathomable. At least to her. Well, to any one.

So she asked. “Are you a Gay?”

“No.”

Relieved, but no less perplexed, she had clamped a hand to her hip. “Then why? I simply don’t understand. We’ve been seeing each other for the best part of two weeks now and...”

“It’s difficult to explain,” he had interrupted quietly.

“Am I not a female?”

“Oh, you’re all female.”

“Then why?” She had grown angry then, quite furious actually. “It’s not as though sex were anything special. It’s a bit of bloody fun is all! At least most people think it is..!”

At which point she had left off her tirade. For the simple reason that he had stood up, suddenly, and begun to undress—thus giving her something else to do. To wit, to look. First at his slim flat chest and belly. Then at his muscular flanks and legs. She had always quite fancied those legs, his legs. Then, when he straightened up, discarding the last garment nervously, at his... Well, the shock had been palpable. Utter. Next she knew her free hand had gone to her mouth, while she gaped at him, no doubt goggle-eyed...

* * *

It had been a frightful moment, every bit as terrible as Michael James

had been anticipating for so long—for so very many years. Why he had given in to the impulse, then, with her, he would never know...

Of course he had been thinking about sex, especially sex with Starr. She was a fabulous female. A trifle heavyish, perhaps, but he preferred to think of that as “rounded.” Her blondish hair intrigued him, the way she tended to flick it absently from one shoulder or the other. The breasts were good too. Obviously full and firm. And when she perched on the corner of his desk, his Supervisor checking on progress, the urge to reach out and caress her shapely upper leg had been almost irresistible. More than once he had consciously stopped his trembling fingers from sliding up the muscular thigh and under the hem of her short skirt.

He had been startled yet excited when she asked him out, even more so as they had got on so well. He liked her laugh—the soft chuckle which seemed to emanate from deep in her throat—and he went to considerable lengths to make her do so whenever possible. He also relished the twinkle in her blue eyes. There was no doubt about what she wanted. Nor of his own desires. All of which made sex inevitable. Probably.

But...

Sighing, he reached out for the bedside control panel and pressed the icon for Display Mode. The time appeared on the wall-screen, “23:12,” as did the date, “12/05/2058.” He jabbed the icon again, erasing the time and date, and covered his face in his hands. She would have him arrested, of course. They would come between oh-200 and oh-400. They would not want publicity. Not yet. At least he would not have over-long to wait.

Not that he was worried so much about the punishment. That was set in both law and precedent, had been ever since the legislation was passed in the second decade of the new millennium: the combination of medical technology and female parliamentarians’ concerns regarding residual male aggressiveness deciding the issue once and for all. No, the procedure was simple, and apparently painless—and a year or two of servitude for failing to Report The Aberration was only to be expected. It was the trial he feared.

The millions of wall-screens tuned in to every word and nuance. The verdict inescapable in any event.

And she would report him. Despite the fact she had seemed to enjoy the experience, there was no question of her keeping his long-held secret. Even had the legislation not meant her ruin as well, the expression on her face in that

instant had spelt his doom...

* * *

“But...” she had swallowed, struggling to clear the lump from her throat, “but you have... I mean...” she had broken off, at once both horrified and fascinated, unsure what to do or say next.

“Yes.” His voice had been a tremulous whisper, his flesh crimson. “Now you see why... well... Umh...” he too had broken off in mid-sentence, his hands flapping at his side in a helpless shrug.

“But. Jesus!” She had run her hand through her blonde hair.

He had flapped his hands again, uncertain what to do with them. Whether or not to cover himself, perhaps?—no matter how redundant the gesture.

“Umh?”

And in that moment he knew. Her mouth closed, and her round blue eyes narrowed—and began to twinkle. She had him, could do exactly as she pleased. She knew it. He knew it. And she knew he knew it. The full impact of his error hit him like a blow when the smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, and she said: “I think you’d best explain to yourself, don’t you?”

“What’s there to say?” he mumbled.

“How?” she replied sharply. Then, following a suitable pause, she snapped: “Well, I’m waiting. Explain yourself.”

He averted his gaze, toed the carpet. “My parents were itinerants. Day-workers for the hydroponics operators. My mother gave birth at home. She didn’t believe in Doctors.” He shrugged. “And she didn’t believe in the procedure.”

“Really?!” She cocked an eyebrow. “How extraordinary. How extraordinary all round. So to speak. I trust you don’t mind if I..?”

The rest remained unsaid. Did not need to be said. He was in no position to object.

So she had, coming directly for him. Although her first touch had been fleeting, her ingrained revulsion apparently kicking in at that instant, tearing her hand away of its own accord. But it had been amusing, odd, a completely different tactile experience from any she had had to date. He could tell from the flush to her cheeks and the excited gleam in her eyes.

She had chuckled, that deep throaty chuckle he enjoyed so much, her

fingertips brushing lightly. “But how?” she had asked. “All these years?”

“With the greatest of care.” He had chuckled then himself.

And she cupped him then, still tentatively, pressing him slowly back on to the settee. Where she knelt beside him and tossed her hair, pushing his arms up until his hands were interlaced behind his head. Then she prised apart his thighs, with his assistance, and the blonde hair caressed his chest. The scent of her filled his nostrils.

“They’re so weird,” she murmured, her expression rapt. “Such a funny shape.”

Her fingertips were probing freely now, tracing each of them in turn, lifting them ever so gently—tickling him in the hypersensitive region underneath. And he put his head back in response to her ministrations, resting it on the padded back of the settee with a sigh. He was dreadfully aroused. Until she squeezed a little too hard, causing him to stiffen abruptly.

“Oww!”

She sat up suddenly, twinkling blue eyes searching his. “Sorry. Well, I don’t know they’re sensitive, do I?”

“Take it from me, they are.”

And they had both chuckled then, enjoying themselves and the novelty of the experience. Settling back into her task, she kissed him on the cheek and whispered: “When I was at school, one of the girls found an old website—so old the video wasn’t even in real-time. You know?”

He nodded. He had seen several of those ancient sites, lost forever in cyberspace. More often than not, the sound and the film had been out of sync.

“We’d seen the official tapes, of course. But nothing like this. I mean, these two were really going at it.”

“People tend to do that,” he murmured, taking a chance and lowering one hand: feeling the smoothness of her flesh, finding a breast.

“At first we were repulsed. Or pretended we were. But I never was.” She paused, smiling at the memory. “It turned out none of us were, not really. Amie was the first to giggle. Then we were all giggling. They were just so funny... From that moment on, I’ve always wondered what they felt like. Hey, who said you could make free with the hand?”

He had found her smooth slightly rounded lower belly. “Want me to stop?”

“I’ll take it under advisement.” She chuckled.

Definitely worth it, he decided. So much better than, well... being all alone in his bed. So much much better!

* * *

Yes, she thought, removing the poster, her twinkling eyes scanning the smaller print as she rolled it into a tight cylinder in her hands: “Male Testicles and Prostate are a leading cause of Cancer in Men...” “The sole cause of unwanted pregnancy...” “A safe and simple procedure, practiced by pet owners for generations...” “No detrimental side effects, or loss of significant function...” “Have your pubescent male(s) registered today...” Yes, it was an awesome responsibility.

But her own ovaries were stored safely at the clinic, awaiting the day she decided to become a mother. So no bother there. And it had been fun, such fun.

Setting off down the stairs once more, the poster tucked under her arm, she thought this could well be amusing. Very amusing... [2048]