

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #45 - January 2000

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Story Bytes

Very Short Stories
Lengths a Power of 2

Editor

M. Stanley Bubien
<editor@storybytes.com>

Editorial Assistant

Kevin Athey
<kathey@pobox.com>

Web Site

<<http://www.storybytes.com>>

Weekly Mailing List

1 to 2 stories weekly via e-mail
<subscribe@storybytes.com>

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**Story Bytes better
than sound bites.**

The Carriage

Mimi Carmen

Christmas in Syracuse was tough that year, especially for the unemployed. My mother wasn't unemployed, but the next thing to it. She sold from door to door, waitressed in the Boston Candy Kitchen, and sometimes worked as an extra in Dey Brothers' Department Store.

She was also bringing me up alone. Christmas presented a real problem. Usually she filled a stocking with apples, onions, potatoes and carrots, and tied a pretty ribbon around the top. I pretended I didn't care, but deep down I did.

But the year I turned five something special happened. Mother had some prosperous friends who invited us to spend Christmas Eve with them and stay overnight. I was in seventh heaven because their little girl Rosemary and I would be able to watch for Santa together.

Oh, what a beautiful home! The tree stood handsome, tall and bulging with paper-thin bulbs, strings of popcorn and candy canes. Surely that tree was the most elegant of all of the trees in Syracuse!

Rosemary and I played with some of her games, but most of all, we shivered with excitement, sharing the moments just before Santa came, whispering what we had asked for.

I knew what I wanted, and since nothing seemed impossible in this fairyland of a home, I knew I'd get it. I wanted a dolly with *real* hair and a *Doll Carriage!*

It just so happened that was exactly what Rosemary wanted also.

Our mothers had told us only *good* little girls received presents.

Sleep was difficult. Once I thought I heard Santa. I went to the top of the stairs and was sure I saw him, but I thought he might be angry if he noticed me peeking while he was delivering our toys, so I hurried back to bed.

The next morning we raced down the stairs without even our slippers.

Sure enough, there was a beautiful doll with *real* yellow hair sitting in a large white *carriage*.

A card on the carriage said, "To Rosemary, with love, from Santa."

But I was Jean Louise!

Another doll sat in one of the parlor chairs, a little black dolly, with a sad smile and kinky, black hair.

That doll had my name on it, Jean Louise, but *no carriage!*

I often played with a black girl named Sue, and I suddenly wished she was here to see this doll. I hugged the little black dolly to me and immediately named her after Sue, and told her I'd find her carriage right away.

I looked behind the davenport, behind chairs, and even went out on the porch. Maybe Santa had left it at the wrong house. Maybe he left it somewhere else, like the kitchen. But no, there was no carriage anywhere in the house. After exploring the kitchen, I even went down the dark cellar stairs, and up the narrow steps to the attic. But no, there just wasn't a carriage anywhere.

I talked to my mother, tearfully explaining that I wasn't a *bad* girl; I reminded her that I helped her dust and make the bed and minded my teacher in school. Honestly, I was sure I was the best little girl in Syracuse!

Mother tried to make me feel better. She told me to take care of my little black dolly who needed my love. She reminded me of our usual Christmas with just apples and potatoes and onions stuck in one of her stockings, and some ribbon candy if she sold enough of her creams or got on extra at Dey Brothers'. But this only made me feel worse.

She wanted me to be happy for Rosemary and her dolly and carriage. But what about me? Why didn't I get a *carriage* like Rosemary, that's what I wanted to know? If I could just figure out what I had done wrong I'd feel better.

I wanted to ask Santa why he thought I was a *bad* little girl...

* * *

That was a long time ago. Nobody has potato and onion stockings any more, I guess.

This Christmas Eve, our tree glows fat and bright, and smells of fresh pine, with presents wrapped in red and green paper tied with gold ribbons, piled high on the couch.

We've darkened the room to only the lights from the tree and the log burning in the fireplace.

Our friends have gathered and we exchange our gifts, taking time to

exclaim as each is opened.

My gift is finally handed to me, and I unwrap it, still with the same tingle of excitement I had at five, taking the paper and ribbons off, trying to guess what my it will be.

I try extra hard to guess, because this gift is different. It has a hard surface, but there's a strong light coming out through the trimmings, and the stars on the package reflect a shimmering onto the ceiling of our darkened room.

I hold my breath for a moment.

My friends want me to hurry, but I try to make it last.

I think it must be a new jewelry box, I tell them.

The box is wrapped in paper with Santa riding high in the clouds in his sleigh with the moon just behind him. I carefully take off the paper to save it, and fold it with the ribbons secured inside, to be used again because they match and are as good as new—just as my mother did.

The box is of wood and has a top which slides off. Inside is an exquisite miniature white doll carriage, so real even the wheels roll and the hood moves up and down.

A note is written in a beautiful script handwriting with a picture of Santa in a sleigh waving to me at the top.

Dear Jean Louise,

Many Christmases ago, I couldn't leave this because I ran out of carriages. It wasn't because you were a bad girl—you were a good girl! You still are a good girl, Jean Louise, so I decided to leave this, even tho' it's very late. Sorry and love. Stay as sweet as you are.

Love, Santa Claus. [1024]

Magic Man

M. Stanley Bubien

My newborn son dozed warmly upon my lap on his first night at home. It was totally different than I expected. No crying, no fussing—just a tiny baby resting quietly, adding to the peace that was Christmas.

He gurgled softly and smacked his lips. I lifted him and cradled him against my chest, wondering at how small and vulnerable he was. It reminded me that I, too, had once been completely helpless. For most of life, actually, it seemed that way—and sometimes still.

My own father, however, had always been totally capable. He was a sort of magic man, always having the right thing to say, the perfect thing to do in any given circumstance—like magic.

This thought, coupled with the steady rhythm of my son's breathing, sent me back to one Christmas in particular. I have no recollection to how old I was, but I do recall how much I weighed: forty pounds. My jaw had nearly dropped when my mother announced the size of our turkey.

"Twenty-eight pounds," she said, pulling it from the oven and setting it upon the stove. "Enough to feed an army."

I bent my head to examine my own stature, thinking that surely this beast of more than half my weight had to be an anomaly of nature. "How...?" I began to ask, but my mother was already off, dashing about the kitchen in search of one utensil, then another. The mystery would have to wait because I was forced into dodging both left and right to avoid being trampled under foot.

Upon obtaining her quarry, she laid out a cutting-board and stood over the turkey holding a fork and spoon, but these were so oversized, I would swear someone designed them for the giant from "Jack and the Beanstalk." She examined the steaming bird from above, and nodding, she reached inward to extract it.

>From my vantage, first fork, then spoon disappeared below the rim of the pot. With a lick of the lips, my mother began lifting. But, instead of turkey coming free, the pot rose wholesale from the stove. Worse still, in her straining, my mother leaned back, bringing bird with her, so that when she lowered it again, the pot rested only partway upon the range-top. When she relaxed her

grip, it teetered forward and began to slide from its resting place.

I scrunched my arms to my sides. My mother, however, reacted like lightning. She stabbed fork and spoon back into the pan with a shriek and halted our dinner's free-fall.

"Are you all right?" my father's voice questioned from behind me.

"Your turkey!" my mother replied, pointing the fork threateningly at my father's chest. "It's stuck! And I almost dropped it on the floor trying to get it out."

"Hmm," my father mumbled. "Would you like me to help?"

"No," she blurted, "I wouldn't! So why don't you go back into the living room and finish your drink."

Instead of leaving the kitchen as my mother demanded, he placed his half-full glass onto the counter. "I'm sorry," he said calmly. "I didn't know you were having trouble." He extended his hand, "Please. I'm here to help."

Wiping her brow with her apron, she sighed, "all right," and presented him with fork and spoon.

My father took position before the stove. He shuffled his feet to gain proper footing and raised fork and spoon to shoulder height, preparing his attack. In one motion, the utensils disappeared below the pot's rim. And again, just as my mother had, my father lifted the whole thing from the stove. He puffed under the exertion, but fortunately he possessed both the strength and foresight to return it to a secure resting place before letting go.

My father shook his head at the turkey and said to my mother, "You're right."

With those words, I knew we were defeated. I imagined Christmas dinner without a main course: we'd be left with just potatoes, stuffing and cranberry sauce—and I hated cranberry sauce!

But just then, when we needed it most, my father worked his magic.

"Why don't we do this together?" he asked my mother.

After scooting the cutting-board as close as possible to the stove, he directed my mother to grasp the pot with both hands as he pushed his tools back into the abyss. But, before yanking at the bird a second time, he paused. He took one long breath and held it. The kitchen fell silent in anticipation. But, within the silence, my father breathed words which drifted into the air and reached my ears.

"Dear Lord," my father prayed, "by your grace." With those words, he

winked at my mother and lifted.

Like my father, I held my own breath; afraid to watch, yet transfixed.

The pot rose slightly, but my mother forced it back down and my father strained harder. Suddenly, with a sharp report, the turkey cracked free. As it ascended into view, I saw that my father impaled one end with the fork while cradling the spoon beneath the other.

“Whoa!” I gasped as our main course flew from pot to cutting-board. Once safely upon its final perch, my father slid it away from the counter’s edge.

“Now you get to carve it,” my mother told him.

My father grinned, and as he began inserting the blades into the electric knife, he noticed me watching, hand over mouth, awestruck. For a moment, I believed he was going to bow like so many performers I had seen on TV. But instead, his grin widened to a beaming smile and, with a wink, he reached across the distance between us and patted me on the head.

My own son stirred, and I was moved away from the memory. He smacked his lips in the same way that had sent me into my reverie. I gazed at this beautiful baby, body so close that he warmed me like a furnace, and wondered if I would be able to perform feats of magic for him as well.

“Dear Lord,” I uttered over my infant son, “by your grace, by your grace.” [1024]

Great Physician

M. Stanley Bubien

It was on a Christmas Eve, and Luke Biset was just eleven when he decided exactly what it was he wanted to be when he grew up. His parents had long ago moved from France—bringing Luke with them, giving birth to his brother, Nicholas, later—and they lived together in a suburb of Phoenix, Arizona. It was the land of high desert, deep swimming pools—theirs having the unusual feature of a black bottom—and, even in late December, absolutely no snow.

So different from their original home in northern France, but it was the snow that Luke's parents missed most. For this reason, every Christmas Eve, they hosted a party with the theme of "Frost." Friends and family alike were invited to celebrate the coming Noel by making their attendance wearing something white.

"Papa!" Luke cried out after hearing the doorbell, "someone else is here."

"Yes, yes son," Papa replied in French, "Open the door."

Upon turning the knob, Luke was greeted by a wholly white figure—from slacks and shirt to grey hair—save for the dark trench coat which draped to his feet.

"Merry Christmas, young man," Father Harry greeted.

Luke stood speechless. He often had trouble finding words in front of this priest from Saint Johns, the Catholic church they attended, for this man insisted on being called by his first name, something unheard of in the more traditional churches of France. Yet the impression was even greater tonight, as Father Harry had actually shed his priestly garb and collar, donning, for the evening, completely normal clothes.

"Whoa," Luke mouthed.

"Good evening, good evening," a voice intoned behind him in near-perfect English.

Luke stepped aside to allow Papa to wave a glass of egg nog at the priest as an invitation to enter.

"What a wondrous idea for a party." the priest exclaimed as he traded his coat for the egg nog.

“Ah, Father Harry, glad to have you.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world! Reminds me of my days in medical school,” Father Harry stated, waving an arm to indicate his bleached clothing.

“Wait, wait,” Papa replied, shaking the coat at him. “I would swear the physician scrubs are green.”

“I always tell the kids ‘you shouldn’t swear’!”

Papa gave the priest a look that Luke had received so frequently in the past: a wrinkled scowl with one eye squinted.

Father Harry laughed and slapped him on the shoulder, “Of course they’re green! That’s a Christmas color too!”

“Ah Harry,” Papa replied. “Entered the priesthood to become the comedian. But I do believe you should have remained a doctor.” He put an arm on the father’s back and escorted him within to say hello to Mama.

Luke trailed a safe distance behind, still somewhat dazzled by the boisterousness of this holy man. But before he made it very far, a hand reached out and stopped him.

“Oh Luke! There you are.” It was his Aunt Doris, the first of their family to move to America, and the quickest to shed everything French in order to embrace her new culture. “So, young man,” she said running her forefinger across his milky tie, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

In the past, Luke had learned to anticipate this question, for no matter what the occasion, she always asked it, but tonight he had forgotten to prepare.

“Eh,” he replied, eyes following the retreating priest. “Eh.” The priest, still being led by Papa, turned the corner into the kitchen and exposed the burning candle sitting upon the dining-room table.

“A fireman,” Luke blurted.

“What a perfect choice! You’ll be able to rescue damsels in distress!” Somehow, regardless of his answer, she had the uncanny ability to turn it into something about girls.

“Why would I want to do that?” Luke replied.

His aunt rolled her eyes and tousled his hair, sending him again on his way.

Entering the kitchen, Luke realized he had lost Father Harry. Mama was there though, wearing an ivory gown which covered her shoulders in a lace pattern resembling snowflakes, and she was laying out the next batch of hors d’oeuvres upon a long platter.

Mama smiled and said, “Bored already? Have any of your friends arrived yet?”

“Nope.”

“I’m sorry. They should be here soon.”

“I know.”

“Well,” she said lifting the platter. “In the meanwhile, why don’t you go play with your brother?”

“Ah, Mama! Do I have to? What if someone sees me?”

“Nicholaus may only be five, but he’s still your brother,” she answered as she carried the appetizers out of the kitchen.

“Man!” Luke mumbled to himself, for he knew he’d be in trouble now if he didn’t do as his mother said. But he could delay the inevitable. Wandering slowly into the dining room toward their Christmas tree, he passed it for what seemed like the hundredth time that day. It gave Luke a queasy sensation, stepping so close to the unopened packages along the pine’s trunk, and from the clock on the wall, he calculated that it would be nearly fourteen hours before he would be opening them.

“Fourteen!” Shaking his head he went off in search of his brother. He first climbed the stairs, hoping that Nicholaus was on the second floor because it would afford him some warning when his friends showed up. But after checking each room, he mumbled “Dang!” and leapt his way back down again.

Along the stairway, a large window ran—designed to further brighten the house during the day while also affording a view into the backyard—and out this window Luke could see into the pool as he passed. The lights were on, and against the black bottom, a large white blob rested. Luke halted. “Hmm,” he intoned, trying to figure out what it was. Unsuccessful yet intrigued, for the time being he abandoned his search for his brother and headed toward the backyard to solve this new mystery.

Once out the sliding glass door, he made his way across the grass and noticed that the pool gate was open. “Hmm,” he mumbled, passing through without closing it behind him and walking up to the edge of the pool. Wavelets bounced back and forth against the coping, distorting the underwater image. Bending closer, Luke tried to get a better view of the roundish blob, for there was something vaguely familiar about its blanched color. As one of the ripples marched by, his gaze was distracted and involuntarily followed it in its progress toward the diving board. And there, on the far side of the board, lay the elf-cap

Mama had placed on Nicholas' head before the party began.

Nicholaus!

Luke turned and bounded toward the house, screaming, "Mama! Mama!" Throwing open the glass door, he charged into the living room and yelled, "Mama!"

"Luke!" Papa hollered with a scowl. "What is it?"

"Nicholaus! Nicholaus is in the pool. He's drowning!"

Papa dropped his egg nog, spilling the thick beverage into the carpet, and sprinted from the living room and out the open door. Luke followed, and before he even reached the grass he heard the splash as Papa dove into the pool. Papa already had Nicholas lying flat upon the cement when Luke came panting up.

"Nicholaus. Nicholaus." Papa cried. "What do I do? Call an ambulance! Call an ambulance!"

"Dear Lord!" Father Harry said as he arrived. He fell to his knees beside the soaking child's prostrate form and placed one hand over the boy's heart and an ear over his mouth. "Please!" After arching Nicholas' neck and forcing his mouth open, the father bent down and blew several quick breaths within.

"Great Physician," he said and switched to pumping the child's chest. He returned to mouth-to-mouth briefly, and again pressed against the heart with the words, "Can't heal all." He continued these alternations, and each time he would speak. "But heal," Soon though, the phrases were more stilted as the strain began weighing on the father, and they eventually became one single word.

"Heal," he gasped between breaths.

Luke listened to the father's begging; he clenched his fists at his sides while a tightness formed in his throat, making it difficult to swallow.

"The ambulance should be here soon," Aunt Doris said with both arms cradling Mama who shivered, silently observing the terrible scene.

Suddenly, Nicholas coughed. The priest turned him over and thumped his back. Water gushed from the boy's mouth, and he hacked harder. Father Harry lifted him and hugged him, now caressing his back.

"Yes, Lord, yes. Thank God." Rubbing Nicholas' wet hair, he said in a soothing tone, "You're going to be all right. Yes you are." And louder, "he's all right."

At that instant both Papa and Mama fell upon priest and child. Luke could not see whose arms Father Harry placed Nicholas into, as they were both wrapped about him so tightly, tears streaming from their cheeks.

“Mama,” Nicholas whimpered in a tiny, high-pitched voice that Luke could barely make out. “What’s wrong? Why’m I all wet?”

Both Mama and Papa laughed and embraced him even harder.

“Good work, young man,” Father Harry stated after he stood, and Luke realized the priest’s hand was resting upon his shoulder. “Your quick thinking saved his life,” Father Harry grinned down upon him.

“I didn’t do anything. You’re the one who saved him.”

The priest’s grin faded from his face.

“Where did you learn to do that anyway?” Luke asked.

With a sigh, Father Harry answered, “I was a doctor once.”

“I know. Is that what they teach you?”

“That and a lot more.”

“I think I’d like to be a doctor. Can I learn that too?”

Father Harry’s fingers gripped Luke as he replied, “Yes. But there’re some things they don’t teach you.”

“Like what?”

“That it doesn’t always work. That sometimes you can’t save them.”

“Even if you’re a really good doctor?”

Father Harry sniffed and rubbed at a drop of water which ran off a strand of hair that had become wet while he was trying to resuscitate Nicholas. “I thought I was really good once,” he said, “but a lot of my patients died. I wanted to save them—each and every one—but they died anyway.”

Before Luke could ask another question, two paramedics burst from the house and jogged across the grass dragging a gurney behind them. Dressed in yellow and red waterproof clothing, the first squatted before Luke’s parents, asking quietly to examine Nicholas. He took the boy, whose eyes widened in surprise at seeing the rescue workers with their huge helmets and bright clothing. Sitting Nicholas on the gurney, the paramedic removed a penlight and began his examination by shining it into the child’s pupils.

Luke watched in fascination while Father Harry spoke again, “I couldn’t save all of my patients. But after I became a priest, I learned that even the greatest physician of all could not heal everyone—even though he wanted to.” He tapped Luke’s shoulder, “Just like me.”

“But you saved him,” Luke pointed at his brother.

The paramedic completed his examination of Nicholas, who now sat wrapped in blankets, while Aunt Doris rubbed a towel against his head. The paramedic faced Papa and Mama who stood holding each other. “I think he’s fine, but we’d like to take him in to the hospital just to be safe.”

“What?” Mama exclaimed, “No!”

Papa pulled her against him and uttered some words in French. She shook her head once or twice, but her demeanor soon softened. Sensing the change, the paramedic said, “He’s okay, ma’am. It’s just standard procedure. You can even get him some new clothes to change into before we go.”

Aunt Doris hurried inside to find the change of clothes for Nicholas, and Papa, still holding Mama, forced a tight-lipped smile and nodded.

“Well,” the father replied to Luke as Aunt Doris returned. “I’m not sure if I’m the one who saved him.” He removed his grasp from upon Luke. “How’s this? Why don’t we both take credit for it, one doctor to another.” He presented his hand. “Deal?”

Glancing at Aunt Doris, who was leading Mama and Papa away after the gurney carrying Nicholas, Luke reached out and said, “deal.” [2048]

For Rich Bermudes.