

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #46 - February 2000

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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 Big C

Paul Schwartz

Like flowers laid upon a fresh grave, she places her hands upon her breasts, exposed mounds of her earth. “It begins here. It ends here.”
Caressing hands create a rose in bloom. [32]

A Message to Humanity

M. Stanley Bubien

Some people call it a black cloud. I call it being pissed off at the world. The beach was the only place I could go when I felt this way—usually to relax—but today, I wanted to do something I hadn't since I was a teenager.

Walt and I used to hate the beach in the summer.

"There ain't even a place to stick our surfboards!" Walt cried, waving toward the groundswell of sunning bodies.

"Tourists go home," I frowned.

"Too bad they can't hear you."

"Why don't I write it down and send it to the newspaper?" I laughed, but Walt raised an eyebrow.

"I got a better idea!"

Board under arm, he marched to the shoreline and began dragging his big toe through the sand. In long, jagged letters, he etched the words "Tourists Go Home!" like it was a message to humanity.

From then on, we did that all the time, moving beyond our original slogan to suggestions about tourists' daughters, haranguing the lifeguards, and of course, the random profanity—my personal favorite.

And exactly what I planned to write today.

The sand munched underfoot as I marched toward the shoreline. But, as I approached a patch of seaweed, I noticed scratches there already.

Just my luck!

I jogged over and stared. I must've read it ten times in disbelief—words neither Walt nor I had ever considered writing.

There at ocean's edge sat a general message—not addressing anyone in particular, but to all who cared to look: "I Love You!" [256]

The Automotive History of Me

Toby Estes

First there was the Festiva, a tiny little car that thought it was a 4X4. It spent its days barreling up and down sand dunes, in and out of river valleys, skiing on an occasional slope, and finally being washed away in the Mississippi with a storm.

Its replacement was an Aspire, another Ford, aspiring to be a real car. It too frequented the off-road trails and forded an occasional river. It too suffered an untimely demise, this one on a bike path, as luck would have it crashing into a pole meant to keep automobiles off the bikeway.

The third car was the first of many disposable cars, a car meant to be driven until a building landed on it or the engine blew up, whichever came first. Neither did. This car, the I-Mark, died of natural causes, or it would have if some crazy woman had not done a U-turn on the Freeway and hit it head on—on its owner's birthday.

Then came the Tempo, after the suspension anyway, and its destiny was apparently fulfilled with someone else behind the wheel. It was still intact when it was traded for another Aspire a mere 17,421 miles later.

The second Aspire, not having the gumption of its predecessor, lost its engine and its transmission the same time, merely 100,000 miles after its acquisition fourteen months previously. It was returned to the dealership from whence it came with a red bow on the hood with a polite note containing not so polite words—and the keys—taped to the bow.

The second disposable car, this one a Prelude, was the most reliable car in history ever to meet its match in the form of a raccoon on steroids in the middle of the mountains in Utah leaving the owner hitch-hiking back to civilization—if Kansas could be called that—along the side of the road reading—thankfully—a good book—on its owner's birthday.

Next came the first Nissan, another disposable car that survived 7,000 miles before suffering two consecutive fires, one in the ash-tray eventually

making its way to the passenger seat—which was empty of passengers—and then to the floorboards, and the second fire on the engine. The mechanic proclaimed it good as new on inspection, then led the owner back to a “test field” where the car was “test driven” over a ramp and into and on top of clumps of trees and bushes until the car stopped running.

The next and last Aspire, earned by the last idiot who stood with his hand on it for 72 hours, was acquired for the sole purpose of experimentation, to see if it could jump a seventy-foot gorge in the Ohio Valley. It could not.

The fate of the final car, another disposable car, has yet to be determined, but had it a personality, it would probably be tossing around that famous old adage about normal people being boring, and hoping, just hoping, that it would have one last chance to find out whether or not this was true. [512]

The Bolsheviks Were Ruthless

M. Stanley Bubien

The Bolsheviks were ruthless, even after my father abdicated. I may not remember details, but that I shall never forget.

“Don’t worry Anna,” my father had said, wiping my tears. “We’re under their protection.” I don’t think he trusted them, but he tried to make us believe he did.

The house arrest lasted years—or so I’ve been told. What I do know involves visions of my mother’s stern beauty and constant planning.

“Here’s another diamond. I’ve tied it off.” She handed it to me. I fingered it gingerly, and, as she taught me, obscured the heirloom within my favorite gown using needle and thread.

“You’ll be a princess again when you wear that,” my mother smiled, returning to her own sewing as if that action could return us all to the Czardom.

The Bolsheviks, however, denied us.

Even in his finest dress, I noticed the sweat upon my father’s brow.

“Ah,” the hulking Bolshevik said as he lead us downstairs. “What a portrait these children will make, sparkling like angels above.” He rested his palm upon the shoulder of my gown. The gentleness of his gigantic fingers surprised me.

“Don’t touch her!” my father commanded.

The Bolshevik turned a dark eye to him.

My mother brushed his grasp aside and scolded, “You cannot manhandle a princess so.”

His gaze fell to the floor as if ashamed, “My apologies.” His toothy grin, however, betrayed him.

The portraitist made an elaborate show of arranging us. First all seated, then in a circle about my father, then an embrace. Finally, he waved “Perfect!” with satisfaction. But something was amiss, for he had set us standing shoulder-to-shoulder in an awkward pose.

Stepping away, he grasped the curtain, “And now to the tools of my trade.” With a tug, he revealed soldiers—many soldiers—aiming rifles at us. My mother’s grip crushed my forearm as the room exploded with gunfire.

The bullets sparked as they bounced from my diamond-encrusted gown. But it still hurt. It hurt so badly, I actually passed out. Pain is strange, though. It renders you unconscious, yet awakens you also. And so it was, that, the cold, and the voices.

“I won’t do the children.”

“I will, then!” a throat rumbled. “Take your hatchet, use it on the Czar.”

Someone grabbed my arm. Recognizing those gentle fingers, I opened my eyes to the hulking Bolshevik hovering over me.

“Ah!” the man screeched and jumped back, dropping his axe. In that instant, I took in the bodies of my family, the ground wet and red with blood. I leapt to my feet, kicked off my shoes and sprinted into the trees. I think that was my mother in me.

“Get her! There must be no heir! Find her!”

But I had had years to explore the forest, and I eluded them.

Or so the story goes.

I have read that account, and so many others that I no longer recall the exact truth. But details matter not. For my family died that day. Yet I lived. And so, too, do the Bolsheviks. [512]

Grandpa Always Came Through

M. Stanley Bubien

My parents didn't get me. Not at all. Yeah, my Mom noticed that I liked to read. But that was it. "Here Benny," she said a few weeks back. "I brought this for you."

I glanced up from the pages of C.J. Cherryh's *The Pride of Chanur*, but when I realized she'd produced a dictionary-sized hard back, I frowned.

"Shakespeare?"

"The complete works!"

"Mom, I like Science Fiction. Not Shakespeare."

She smiled, "Oh, just give it a try."

I did. Boring. I preferred stuff about space, like flying ships and fighting battles. I figured by the time I'd be an astronaut, most of that'd be possible.

"By the way Benny," my Mom said after I returned the Shakespeare. "We're visiting your grandparents in two weeks. They have something special planned."

I made a quick calculation. "Can you change it?"

"Why?"

I rolled my eyes. My grandparents lived in Lancaster, California, just a few miles from Edwards Air Force Base. And everyone knew why that's important!

"The Space Shuttle's landing next week. If we're up there then, we could watch it!"

"Sorry. Dad's already taken the days off."

I knew I should've read that stupid Shakespeare!

The trip lasted three hours—three free, uninterrupted hours to read. Perfect!

I reached into my backpack but came up empty-handed. "Mom. Dad. Have you seen my book?"

“No,” Mom answered. “What’s it called?”

“*The Kif Strike Back.*”

“Yellow cover?”

“Yeah!”

“It was on the kitchen table.”

My mouth dropped open. “You left it?”

“I didn’t know you wanted it.”

My voice cracked. “How could you leave it?”

“Ben!” Dad interrupted. “That’s enough. If you wanted the book, it was your responsibility.”

I swallowed hard. “Then can we stop at a bookstore or something?”

“Absolutely not,” Dad replied.

Sinking in my seat, I whispered, “This trip sucks.”

I did greet my grandparents with hugs, but I remained pretty-much silent even after Grandma passed out the iced tea.

“No sugar, Ben?”

I shook my head and took a sip. The sour liquid ran over the lump in my throat as if it were cooling hot iron.

“What’s wrong, Ben?” Grandpa asked in his cigarette-roughened voice.

“He forgot his book,” my Dad answered. “God forbid he’d actually have to talk to us.”

“Awe,” Grandpa grasped my arm. “What book was it?” I responded in a quiet voice. “Mmm,” he glanced at his watch. “Maybe a ride later will help with that, then.”

Yes! Grandpa always came through! “If it’s still okay,” I said to Grandma, “I’d like some sugar please.” I swear my parents grinned at Grandpa.

Before leaving, Grandpa poured iced tea into a thermos. Kind of weird for a trip to the bookstore, but in the desert everything was far away. I made sure to use the bathroom.

We drove by tons of Joshua Trees, their thick limbs pointing every direction—even up. Exactly where I wanted to go some day. We came to a big intersection and beside the road lay a stoplight pole with the lights and everything still attached.

“That’s weird.”

“Hmm,” Grandpa pursed his lips. “Yep.”

We turned, and the wheels hummed upon fresh asphalt. Over a shallow

hill, Grandpa turned again at another downed stoplight, backing between a pair of scraggly trees.

“Iced tea?” Grandpa offered.

Strange place for a break, but the trees did block the sun. I tried not to guzzle, but I wanted to get to the bookstore. I wiped my mouth, “Done!”

“You’re quick.” Grandpa produced the thermos. “Have some more.”

“Um. The bookstore might close.”

“Bookstore?”

“Yeah, I thought...”

“Oh no. But this is much better.”

“I doubt it,” I mumbled, but I don’t think Grandpa heard. A police car had crested the hill. It pulled beside us, and the officer rolled down his window.

“Excuse me, sir, but you can’t park—” he stopped short. “Oh, Robert! How you doin’?”

“Just fine. Showing my grandson the sights.”

The policeman chuckled. “You’ll soon have your fill!”

“Yesiree.” Grandpa introduced us. I waved, thinking that it was kind of cool that he actually knew a policeman.

“You remember the drill,” the officer said. “Stay put until I drive by again.”

“We’re friends from the Knights of Columbus,” Grandpa explained as the officer sped away. “He told me about this place.”

I looked around. “But there’s nothing here.”

“More tea?”

Between sips, Grandpa asked about my book. Of course I had to explain the first two in the trilogy before he’d understand the third. I was about halfway done describing Chanur’s ship when I felt a rumble. It made my chest vibrate. Neat, but a little scary too.

“Here she comes!” he said, almost spilling his tea as he leaned toward the windshield to peer out. His excitement took the scariness away.

Before we actually saw it, I knew it was a truck. A big one. And going really slowly.

“There she is!” he cried, pointing toward a huge black-and-white shape appearing over the hill. It was an airplane cockpit. Really wide and sort of flat on the bottom. The semi appeared below the cockpit.

That's when I spotted the NASA insignia.

"Grandpa!" I yelled. "Grandpa! It's... it's..."

The delta-winged body shined white on top, and black underneath.

"The Space Shuttle! No way!"

As it approached I could read the different insignias and markings, and I mouthed what each one meant.

"She's a beauty, ay!" Grandpa said grasping the steering wheel. "Look at that wingspan."

"Yeah. It's spread a hundred feet over the desert..." And I froze.

It was heading right toward us. And the wings went further than our car. It was going to hit us. "Grandpa! Grandpa! We better move!"

"Nah, we'll miss the best part."

Before I could reply, it was too late. The Shuttle was upon us. I mean, over us. Right over the car, and right over our heads! Close enough to see individual tiles.

Pointing up at different parts of the spacecraft, Grandpa described each. But I pointed too, filling in facts I knew. It seemed like we spent hours within the shadow of the Space Shuttle, searching together for heat-scars on its tiles. [1024]