

# Story Bytes

**Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.**

Issue #47 - March 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.**

# Cheerleaders

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Mike Marcoe

**A**s a hopeful teenager, a mouthy young man with a gaunt posture and restless hands, and eyes that never fixed themselves in one spot, Sean pursued the cheerleaders in his grade because they were so much more open and seductive—and how their hips could move!—than the nerdy brains and the silent bookworms, and in his twenties he kept his standards very high to avoid ending up with someone whose face he couldn't fall for at every moment; and in the next decade he watched hopefully in the distance for the first round of divorcees, though fewer of them could offer the skin tone he wanted so desperately, while the bookworms had blossomed into beautiful and successful women who said, "Cheerleaders, ahem, cheerleaders, Sean" as they laughed past him at the class reunion; so he sailed into middle age determined to snare the mature type who could also juice herself at a moment's notice ("as the twentysomethings can always do!"), only to spend his seventies surrounded by women in the same room of the County Rest Home as he, including a newly widowed, bright-eyed classmate who said, "Sean, I wish I'd have gotten to know you better back in high school," at which the old man smiled, thought a moment, and then looked past her to a slouching former cheerleader on the other end of the room, who was wetting herself in his— his!— presence, and staring at his restless eyes vacantly as her pungent, salty smell hit the nurses' aides, those sexy young things. [256]

# My Favorite Shirt

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M. Stanley Bubien

“No!” my daughter whined. “I don’t want to!” “C’mon Victoria,” I crooned with arms outstretched, “just one hug.” “No!” she said, and shook her head wildly.

I knew it was a phase, but it still hurt. She used to hug me. I guess I took that for granted, never thinking it would stop—my only real intimacy with her.

“Maybe she doesn’t feel good,” my wife offered.

I shook my head, more irritated than comforted.

The next morning I was awakened with the announcement, “Victoria threw up in her bed.” We both knew who was going to stay home—my wife had a meeting that morning.

Even if she refused to hug me, I still enjoyed being with my daughter. I spent the morning reading her stories, listening to the stereo, and flipping through a picture book while she played with dolls. Around noon she became antsy.

“Daddy, my stomach hurts,” she finally said.

I picked her up. When her head touched my shirt, I heard this horrible retching. Turning to the side, I saw yellow ooze rolling off my shoulder. Hustling into the bathroom, I leaned over the counter as Victoria threw up again. This time, I let it roll down my sleeve and into the sink.

“It’s okay, honey. I have you,” I whispered, almost in tears for her pain.

“I wrecked your shirt, Daddy.”

“Oh, it’ll wash off,” I told her. She barfed again.

But, I was wrong. I wore the shirt proudly for years after that, and the stain never came out. [256]

# Nothing Good Ever Came

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M. Stanley Bubien

“Can’t find a trash can to throw one measly little apple into,” I grumbled at the piece of discarded fruit. Brushing my skirt aside, I knelt beside my daughter, Terry, and said, “Nothing good ever came of litter, honey.” I knew she didn’t completely understand, but I was frustrated. “You won’t be a litterbug,” I pointed. “You’ll always throw your apples away. Won’t you?”

She answered by grabbing my outstretched finger and pulling me into a surprisingly brisk walk—especially for a sixteen month old.

This stroll was our morning routine, our “female bonding” as my husband liked to call it. And we followed the same route every day—which is probably why I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“I can’t believe that apple’s still there!” I cried the next morning.

I would’ve picked it up, but I didn’t want to get my hands dirty—especially with Terry tugging on them whenever I started to lag behind; she couldn’t talk, but she sure knew how to communicate!

It remained there for two days, and each time we passed, I wondered how I could’ve forgotten a trash bag. I did, however, point and tell Terry to always throw her apples out.

Finally, on the third day, someone had picked it up.

Rounding the bend, Terry reached up and took my hand. She pulled enthusiastically, and just as she was nearly at a run, she halted abruptly. Letting go, Terry crouched before the very spot where the piece of litter had lain. Pointing with four fingers, she cried, “Ah-pull!” [256]

# The River Mist

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Florence Cardinal

**T**here's something mystical about a river shrouded in mist. Early morning sun turned the horizon to a glowing orange and pink ribbon. Behind a shimmering translucent curtain, the river lurked in shadows. She followed a woodland trail out of the dawn and into that secluded silence where even the voice of the meadowlark was muted.

Last year, when they were young, they walked hand in hand down this path. Behind these opalescent draperies, they shared their first kiss and their first love as dampness settled on their bodies and seeped into the blanket of discarded clothing. Afterwards, they hurried home, laughing like children, as the sun burned the mist from the river valley.

His dark hair had curled in tight whorls from the dampness. His eyes caressed her, eyes that glowed with the embers of passion. Their smiles spoke of secrets concealed behind the veil of mist.

But their small river was never enough for him. Other mists hid other mysteries. He sought more fiery passions in distant lands. In her imagination she saw him walking out of the mist, whorls of dark hair curling, shirt soaked with mist. He was not alone.

There is something mystical about a river shrouded in mist. Behind that translucent veil magic awaits those who trod vague woodland paths.

He waited there on the edge of the silence. She closed her eyes. He reached out his hand, drew her into the humid stillness to lie in his arms, to be together and young again as mist settled on her skin. [256]

# The Park on Country Lane

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S. Robert McCaffrey

*I*n the Spring at the little park on Country Lane, a small boy sits on the swings underneath the green, budding branches of the tall shade tree. The sun is shining and the high-pitched laughs and squeaks of children playing fill the air. The boy watches them over in the sandbox, on the slide, running to catch a seat on the red and blue merry-go-round whose chrome handles glisten in the sun.

The harder the boy swings his feet, kicking outward while leaning back against the will of the chains in his hands, the higher he climbs. On the swings, the chase isn't important and the sand doesn't get inside your shoes. Alone under the eaves of the tall shade tree, he is in motion, safe from the darkness, the other children, even the screams of his parents as their distance from each other grows.

\* \* \*

*I*n the Summer, at the little park on Country lane, a young man struggles awkwardly within a group of friends on the basketball court—flat, gray cement—near the fences which separate the park from the manicured lawns and sculpted hedges of neighboring suburban homes.

The young man ducks, pivots, looks for the ball, and dodges back to the three-point line drawn in chalk an hour before the game. He barely notices the unwelcome sweat on his brow and under his shirt, and the heavy feeling in his chest—he hasn't played basketball since his parents' divorce.

A short, thin teenager, a natural, ducks gracefully under the outstretched arms of the other players with an agility that continues to surprise everyone. His path to the basket blocked, he fires the ball with its tan and orange rubber over his shoulder—not to the players inside the key, but to the young man, quiet and patient, who stands on the three point line. Two points would tie the game; three would win.

The young man catches the ball, cradles it, leaps into the air and pushes the ball toward to hoop, rolling it off his fingertips amid grunts and arms and

hands and frantic bodies. It circles the rim then drops off the side. Someone near the court calls “Time!” and the other team huddles to congratulate themselves.

His teammates look at each other, anxious to redeem their loss, but the young man has left the game already, his eyes concentrated on a lonely figure on the swings. The tall shade tree above has given her shelter from the glare of the late afternoon sun, leaving her concealed in cool shadows. He grins sheepishly as he approaches her, taking pleasure in her smile and the playful wink from her eye. “Nice shootin’, Tex,” she teases warmly in a false Southern drawl.

The young man sits down on the swing next to hers. She receives his outstretched hand with hers and together they sit in the peace of the advancing evening, swinging and watching the sun turn the sky to a fiery expanse of crimson and magenta as it hastens for slumber under the distant horizon.

\* \* \*

*In the Autumn*, at the little park on Country Lane, a father rocks on the swings, back and forth, back and forth, though gently in deference to his age. In the sandbox, his two children, six and eight, dig a moat around a waxing pile of sand they’ve been pushing and shaping for an hour now. He watches them intently, curiously, as their giggles take to the air.

The children’s faces, diminutive images of their mother’s—gone a year now—are rosy from the cool air. How long has it been since their mother had sat with him here on the swings, he thinks pensively? A wanton breeze from the South sings its solemn lullaby of warmer days past. It nips and tugs and taunts the thinning gold and auburn leaves of the resilient shade tree of his youth. The leaves clutch their branches and twigs with uncertainty and desperation as destiny threatens.

The once shiny slide, covered with the smiles and tears of a thousand summer days reflects the flicker of a black and white television that struggles through the curtained window of a dignified, stately house. The mighty harvest moon watches the man intently as it slips between windblown clouds. The children, too, turn briefly toward their father, wave, then return to the mountains they have created, to the sandbox kingdoms where they are gods.

\* \* \*

*In the Winter*, at the little park on Country Lane, an old man sits on a motionless swing, arms akimbo, watching his labored breaths hang in the air. The park is otherwise deserted in the evening's dusky glow. Inverted pyramids of fragrant smoke rise slowly from the stone chimneys of nearby homes.

The crooked basketball hoop rises staunchly into the crisp evening sky, bent from the weight of missed slam-dunks and forgotten ambitions. It looks abused. Abandoned. There are no chalk marks on the court, no signs of recent use.

The old man turns his gaze toward the slide. The metal has lost its shine and the wooden rails and ladders have faded and warped. The merry-go-round is gone, replaced by two picnic tables and a dented, overturned garbage can missing its lid.

The sandbox remains, however, brimming with sand as always. The old man slowly pulls himself up from the swings where his tired, stiff legs have been resting. Tentatively, he makes his way to the sandbox. Night is quickly overtaking the last rays of the frozen sun. In the fading twilight, he looks up and down the park. Confident no one is watching, he lowers himself to the grainy dirt beneath his feet.

With great effort to his bony, arthritic fingers, he begins pushing and pulling sand into a pile. As the mound grows, he pauses to observe his progress, feeling the harsh, penetrating cold. A tear begins to form in a melancholy, sentimental eye, but is wiped away before it can escape.

Several blocks to the north, a car door slams, unnoticed by the old man on his knees in the sand. A light snow begins to fall on the little park on Country Lane. [1024]