

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #48 - April 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 Irises Are Missing

Vida Evelyn

Oh, dear. [2]

The Last Temptation of Christ

M. Stanley Buben

“**S**ave yourself!” [2]

Angel

Maria Raha

Sitting on the drippy, cold steps of Penn Station, sharing a smoke with a boyfriend. This Saturday night is scattered with drunks, and for once, we are not the drunkest; we do not smell the worst. Late-night, paranoid tourists don't even stare—a few ask for directions. We are spreading our wet, waiting bodies all over that stone, watching stumbling silhouettes wrestle with the escalator.

She shuffles up the steps with the last of her strength. Her pink sweatpants are tinged with brown, and her feet are buried in city-stained bunny slippers. Her eyes look like they've seen so much sadness they're forever doomed to apathy. They are eyes dazed with the work it takes to stay warm, and weary of the excess of privileged people. I'm looking at those glass eyes and thinking that she reeks of survival; that I'm too cold to move, and all I'm doing is waiting for the first train home.

Out comes her wrinkled, begging hand. We turn out our pockets and find nothing. The mouth of the station swallows her descending, dejected frame.

Light another smoke. We are pushing reluctant time forward as it digs its heels in at the dusty smells and sounds of old stories, at the sucking of smoke, at our involuntary shivers.

She's back again. The wrinkled hand, heavy with pleading, is now answering.

She drops four warm quarters into my palm and says, "Get yourselves a cup of coffee. Merry Christmas."

The station gulps her up again before we can say thank you. [256]

The Things You Realize On Your Death-Bed

M. Stanley Bubien

“One last request,” I mumbled. My son stood over the bed, arms crossed, lips pulled taught. “What?” he said. “You’re here. Why?” I asked. I was wasting time—precious time—with a question like that. But I needed an answer.

“Strange request.”

“No,” I fingered the oxygen tube. “Just answer.”

He shrugged. “You’re my father. I’m supposed to be here.”

“No answer.” I tried to shake my head.

He took a deep breath and blew it out. I watched the rise and fall of his chest, the way his ribs expanded, the slight change of color in his cheeks. So intent was I, he’d already finished replying before I heard the words, “What do you want me to say, Dad?”

My hand twitched, “Never... mind.”

We fell silent, neither of us looking at the other, lest we make eye-contact.

So this was the way of it, I thought. Ironic. I’d done everything in my power to keep from alienating him. I stayed out of his business. Let him live his own life. I quietly watched him pick his own college, move away, choose his career, marry the wrong woman. Even when he was a kid, if I didn’t like one of his friends, I kept that to myself. The mistakes were his to make.

“You remember,” I said, breaking the silence, but pausing every-other word. “That time. I taught you to ride. Your bike.”

He cocked his head, frowned and squinted. “Um. I think I learned by myself, after the training wheels fell off.”

I nodded. [256]

The Hardest Part About Tyndale

M. Stanley Bubien

“**T**he hardest part about Tyndale is spelling his name.” My standard joke, designed to ease any tension beforehand, but Mr. Potts frowned with arms crossed. “You don’t know Tyndale.” I said.

“Actually, I do.” Potts tipped his chin toward a collection of bluish paperbacks upon my shelf. “And Barclay, and Chilton. I’ve read a lot of them.”

“A man after my own heart!”

He’d made an appointment seeking “Pastoral Counseling.” Not my favorite thing—Bible studies were my forte—but all part of the job. If I’d known we’d be talking Theology, I would’ve looked forward to this.

“You must be aware of Barclay’s exposition on St. John’s response to the Gnostic heresy.”

He shrugged. “There can’t be a heresy if God doesn’t exist.”

I grinned at his obvious bait. “Ah, but God does exist.”

“That’s what you say.”

“Of course. I’m the Pastor.”

“And that’s why you believe?”

“It’s not just me.” I indicated my library. “Look at these books. All these great minds—”

“I’ve been there,” he dropped his face into his hands. “Many times,” he mumbled, remaining like that, folded silently in upon himself. My grin began to feel a tad uncomfortable, and in the pause, I recalled a study I’d recently prepared, an argument for the existence of God taken from Kant.

“Is that why you’ve come?” I tapped my fingers together. “Because you don’t believe?”

“Yes.” he replied to the floor. “And I wanted to hear why you—” He shook his head. “I’m troubled... By a pie-in-the-sky God who marks “naughty” or “nice” like a great big Santa Claus whenever you do something.”

“But that’s not what it’s about,” I mumbled reflexively.

“He keeps tabs on us.”

Well, yes, God does, I thought. It’s as clear as day from Genesis to Revelation. But something kept me from saying that aloud. “How—” I stole a glance at the blue bindings on my shelf. “How long have you been a parishioner?”

“Three years.”

“Three years! And you don’t believe in God?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure why I should.”

Hadn’t he learned anything from me? “Something’s happened in your life...”

“No! Nothing new, anyway.”

“Well...” I hesitated. Could it be that I’ve failed? Upon my desk, beside worn pages of Kant sat a volume of Tyndale. Now here was someone who understood God. And I must admit, I’d always felt a tinge of jealousy of the man’s intellectual prowess—he argued so powerfully, he could’ve convinced a Buddhist monk.

And as suddenly as darkness falls in Autumn, my grin returned. Potts knew my library, and therein lied the rub. “I have the perfect answer.” I stated. “But, I need a day or two—to give it proper attention.”

He remained head-in-hands, and I allowed him a space of time. “Trust me.” I said. “I’m your Pastor.”

He sighed in response, but sat upright. With that, I knew I had him.

After he’d departed, I began leafing through pages. “Now, where to start...” The answer, I knew it was here. Somewhere. “If not Tyndale, then Barclay. Or certainly Chilton...” [512]

Shroud

Glynn Sharpe

“**W**hy are you looking at me like that. What’s wrong?” she asked, almost playfully.

He didn’t respond and remained fixed there, his jaw slack and his mouth slightly open. She reached down and drew his small face into her hands. He could smell the nicotine on her fingers as she tilted his head up to her to meet her eyes. Those eyes were blue and wet and alert and adoring. Her grip on his cheeks made it difficult to smile but he managed to. She grinned back. He cloaked his mounting fury behind a black curtain of restraint. Ripples of anger began to seep from the core of his being. He marveled at the way he was able to fool her into believing what she wanted to believe. What she needed to believe. Secretly, quietly, he wanted to reach up and scratch her face with the swiftness of a hungry cat. He wanted to feel her flesh beneath his claws like damp clay. He wanted to pull her hair out from its roots and parade around their living room and scream at the top of his lungs and pound his tiny fists against her face until it caved in and was no longer. His chest began to heave inside from the energy needed to bury his seething contempt for his mother.

“Now what’s wrong with you? Why do you have to do this right before I have to go to work? Be a big boy and get yourself ready for school today, okay.” She skied her finger down the slope of his nose, over his dry lips and down to his chest. “You,” she said, and he looked up at her again. “You..... are..... a..... very..... bad.....boy.....” She accentuated each word with a poke of her fingernail into the heart of his chest. “I’m late now, so move it.”

She gave his head a rough shake and walked away. He wanted to chase her down but he didn’t have the strength. His arms and legs were suddenly heavy. It was like cold lead was being poured through a hole in the top of his head, anchoring him to the living room floor. He could hear her tromp up the stairs. He made his way after her, one planted, unsteady step at a time until he was finally able to grip the rail at the foot of the stairs. Once there, he flew up the stairs with the speed and agility of a barn swallow. He swept through each

“Yes you can, you just woke up. Please tell me what she said to you.”

“She said...,” he caught himself before saying it and slipped out of the bed.

“Where are you going?” she asked. “You didn’t finish.”

He stopped in the doorway, his back to her.

“She said that it was okay to cry,” and he did. He couldn’t stop himself. It rolled off him like dead skin. He ran into the bathroom to try to hide his embarrassment and humiliation from his wife. Steven searched the room frantically for something to quell the uncontrollable surge. “Stop it Steven,” he heard her say. The words echoed softly from within the well of his mind. “You’re a big boy now, aren’t you Steven? What would your father think? Everything is going to be all right, you’ll see. Promise me you won’t let daddy see you like this. He’d be so disappointed.”

Steven sobbed out loud and threw his hands over his ears and pushed in with all his might. He had to stop this immediately. He wanted to reach into the bathtub and stuff the stopper down his throat to choke off the flood. He collapsed onto the toilet and yanked a towel from its perch. He stuffed as much of it as he could into his mouth and wrapped the cotton shroud around his head and wailed into it like a man trying both to remember and to forget. [1024]