

# Story Bytes

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

Issue #51 - July 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.**

# I Don't Have a Name for My Mood

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Biju

I don't understand these moments, opportunities go past me in a haze while I stumble for the words to give me air. He hasn't moved in an hour, maybe it was wrong of me to have stood over him making certain that he had stopped breathing, but I assumed for no reason that he would come alive and begin again. I don't recognize this feeling in me, whether it's relief or joy, or simple exhaustion; I don't have a name for my mood. I should've kept the coffee warm, I would at least have that to hold. I should turn off the TV and lay down to sleep. But this chair of his is quite cozy, and I don't want to put down the gun just in case. [128]

# One Man's Nectar

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Tania Hershman

**T**he gods told me, on one of my regular visits up the Mount, that man made them laugh until they sobbed. It was better than cable TV, they screamed.

“How so?” I asked, sipping my nectar (which, frankly, was far too sweet. Would have preferred a whisky, but what can you do when there's a market monopoly?)

“Oh come on,” boomed Zeus. “All that fiddling around with women, tippy-toeing, sensitivity, new-manness, listening, French films. What is that?”

Amid the shrieks and guffaws, I chucked my drink over the side, and wondered what I was supposed to say. Could I defend almost half the race all on my own, or would I just open us up to even more ridicule? It was bad enough they had us wearing togas. [128]

# Papers

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M. Stanley Bubien

**P**apers! Before me, beside me. Papers! They purported to tell the breadth of truth, revealing all to myself, my better, my Nation. But shallow strips they were, inked with words no more revealing than the pulp of Siberian woods.

“Brilliant!” Ilia Petrovich cried. “Brilliant, I tell you!”

Who was I to argue with Petrovich, our most distinguished and revered Editor of Music, Drama and Art for Pravda?

“Come now, Andrey. I find it difficult to believe you disagree.”

Certainly I, Andrey Semionovich, humble critic laboring faithfully for not only my editor but Mother Russia herself, was no one. Yet I did disagree—vehemently so—with both Petrovich and these papers he presented as witness.

“Read, my good friend, read,” Petrovich invited, flapping a circular it in my direction.

“Dmitry Shostakovich. Symphony Number Five,” I spoke aloud. And, ignoring the specified venue and performance schedule, from memory—though it also was inscribed upon that page—I gave the subtitle, “A Soviet Artist’s Reply to Just Criticism.”

With a triumphant grin that exposed perfect teeth, Petrovich replaced the circular and bellowed, “Just criticism! Comrade Shostakovich listened, as any proper Soviet would, to our modest editorial, took to heart the brief suggestion that his music presented a grave danger to our Nation.”

“Enemy of the People Shostakovich,” I reminded my editor. “I recall that being the title Pravda endowed upon him less than a fortnight prior.”

“Certainly. But his symphony! You were there. You listened. The triumph of a Nation. The jubilation in our leaders. The rejoicing of the people! An anthem that resounds from the loins of all Mother Russia!”

“I heard the performance, yes, and that which you describe. But it struck me as forced. As if just below that joyful celebration, the baton of the oppressor beat upon the backs of the noble Russian people.”

For a moment, Ilia Petrovich paused. Not in character for such a man, as so often he marched the corridors of Pravda, barking assignments to those

waiting in the wings to prove themselves. His eyes seemed briefly attracted to the lampstand upon his desk, as if seeking the very light of truth. But, alas, the lamp remained extinguished.

Finger targeting my chest, his blustering laughter burst forth. “Ah ha, the watchful Soviet you have become! I have taught you well! But the lesson of experience, that remains your only shortcoming: the ability to understand when those who have strayed from their Russian heritage wish to once again taste her graces.”

“I find it disturbing that he has come back into those graces quite so suddenly.”

“Pah! Forgive. That is the Soviet way. Just as a shepherd who has guided one of his own back into the flock, he embraces that wayward soul’s return.”

“The Russian way,” I repeated. To be made fools by the Enemy within our midst, one who labels us oppressor and oppressed, smearing dissention while we cheer gaily, beside ourselves in a manner singular to most village idiots.

I sighed as though my breath contained the last hope for a Soviet homeland. “I understand.” [512]

*Thanks to David Pogue and Scott Speck.*

# Time Is Everything

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M. Stanley Bubien

“Time!” “I thought it was all about money,” Trellaine, my companion, replied to the old man. Grey Beard everyone called him. He had no beard. And his hair, well that was black. But it was rumored that old Grey Beard here had broken the monopoly on truth. For the right price, of course.

“Time is everything!” he growled, kissing the rim of a bottle, poorly obscured by a paper sack. Payment from a previous visitor. Myself, I preferred cash—on the advice of my pal Trellaine. Good advice that never failed, at least not in the six months I’d heeded it.

Grey Beard stretched out his hand, open palm up—surprisingly spotless for this particular street-corner. I fished into my left pocket, but Trellaine tapped my shoulder.

“No, no.” He breathed as if the air itself held authority. “Come clean, Mister. So time is everything? Explain.”

“Eh!” The old man growled, but upon realizing no money would be forthcoming, he placed his quarry between his legs.

Wiggling his fingers, “Time for this, time for that,” he shrugged. “Time to stay, time to go.” He pointed at the freeway. “Time flies when you’re having fun. No time to argue,” he wrinkled his brow, “After all, this just isn’t the time.” With a wink, he dug his elbow into Trellaine’s leg, “Time for a quickie?” A scowl was the only response, but he continued, “What time is it?”

He paused and we stared blankly.

“Hello! What time is it?”

“Oh,” I twisted my watch into view. “Around 12:30.”

He crumbled the sack against his bottle. “You’re wasting my time! Now give up!”

Before I could move, Trellaine grabbed my arm. “I think not. You don’t know anything about truth. You’re just a babbling old fool.”

“See here. We had—”

“Ah, come off it. You’ve got your booze. You don’t need anything from us. Would’ve just been a couple of quarters anyway.” Trellaine tugged my

sleeve. “C’mon.”

Grey Beard’s eyes followed us as we departed, even as he upended his paper bag.

“I should’ve figured,” Trellaine sighed. “All that talk. Nothing to it in the end.”

He rambled on, and all the while I fingered the few dollars in my pocket. It felt cold, like chilled steel on a snowy morning. That, I couldn’t fathom; I was only carrying bills.

“A con is—”

“I’m going back.”

“Huh?”

“I feel bad for the guy.”

“Oh, please. He promised truth and didn’t deliver. In the absence of product, there is no payment.”

“Sure, sure.” I tossed Trellaine the keys and told him to keep the engine warm.

Observing my approach, Grey Beard sniffed unenthusiastically, “Like a dog to vomit, eh?”

“Here,” I said, dropping the wadded bills onto his lap.

Instead of glancing down, he glared at me—dead-on. “Had you pegged, I did.”

Sighing, I glanced at my watch. “I have a lot of work to do.”

“Yes,” he replied, though I’d already turned to walk away. “Time is money, you know!”

And his bottle—it gurgled as he shook it toward my retreating back. [512]

# Broken Promises

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Lorraine M. Gregoire

“**S**heesh! Give me a few points for self control!” I snapped at my cranky husband. I wanted to stop at a sporting goods store “Going Out of Business” sale we passed in the mall. “There’s nothing we need”, his usual grumpy male comment. “It’s all overpriced junk. If they had anything good they wouldn’t be going out of business.”

“But, it’s sporting goods”, I wheedled. “Could be some good deals for the grandkids. And, you like boats and fishing stuff. I’ve put up with that photo of your “dream-canoe” stuck on the bathroom mirror for years now. Maybe you’d enjoy just looking around?”

“Are you crazy” his eyes got funny and he said something like. “The boat I want is the Supremo Numero-Uno blah-blah. Soon as I finish saving up 6,000 bucks for that baby I’m going to order right from the manufacturer. Custom. In silver. Yesiree. This loser store wouldn’t carry something like THAT. And I’m sure not going near those sucker crowds.”

“You’re so darn negative and boring!” I retorted. “I happen to like crowds. They make me feel like I’m part of something. I promise I won’t buy anything but I’m going to look around for fun anyways. You go for coffee and I’ll meet you back here in half an hour.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, old girl.” He chuckled in that self-satisfied “I’ll believe it when I see it” way that always gets me riled. “I know you’re going to come out of there with useless junk. You always do.”

His words made me mad. How dare he accuse me of being frivolous! I prided myself on being a wise shopper. I had a darn good nose for bargains and stretched our old age pensions like nobody’s business. Now I had a mad on, that’s for sure. “Boy, I’ll show him.” I promised myself I would not buy a darn thing, no matter what. Ha! I wouldn’t give Mr. Know-It-All smarty-pants reason to gloat.

I squared my chin and marched into the crowded store. Aisles and aisles of hockey equipment, basketballs, golf clubs, exercise equipment, fishing gear, boy toys galore were strung with huge blaring signs. CLOSING OUT SALE - Up to 80% OFF. NO REFUNDS.

Up and down the aisles I strolled, ducked and dodged, humming to myself and enjoying the frenetic energy and excitement of a sale.

All of a sudden, there, at the back of the store, in gleaming silver, full of lifejackets, paddles and fishing stuff, sat the exact canoe of my husband's picture. I gasped and blinked three times. Yup. It was still there. The Supremo Numero-Uno blah, blah. My heart beat wildly. I elbowed my way through the crowds, scrambled over junk in the aisles and darned near fell into the canoe looking for the price tag.

There it was - a little tattered, with the manufacturer's suggested retail price at \$6,750 plus tax crossed out and a handwritten TO CLEAR \$750 AS IS. NO RETURNS. Must be a mistake. \$6000 off? Salesman. I had to talk to a salesman.

I spotted a young fellow with a "Hi. I'm Mathew" tag trying to hide out from the mob of bargain hunters. I clutched his sleeve. "Mathew. Tell me about this El Supremo canoe. What's wrong with it? Why is it only \$750?"

"Oh. There's nothing wrong with it. It's brand new. We're closing the store is all. It's on clearance like everything else. I think that includes lifejackets, paddles and a bunch of fishing gear, too. I'll go check."

A few minutes later he came back and said, "I'm sorry ma'am. Someone made a mistake on the sale tag. It's supposed to be \$4,750 for the whole package. I just talked to my Dad who is running the close-out. He said it was worth more than \$8,000 regular price so it's still a real good deal."

I felt tears well up in my eyes. "Oh well", I said sadly. "Of course, it was too good to be true. This is exactly like my husband's dreamboat. I guess I started to dream myself when I saw that price tag. He's going to be 62 years old Friday. Had to retire early for his health. It's been hard on just the pension but the stubborn old fool has been saving \$10 every week for years to buy one just like this. Just an old man's silly dream, you know. Always said he wanted to spend his retirement out fishing in a canoe," my voice trailed off and I turned and walked away.

I was already at the mall door when Mathew caught up with me. "Do you have \$750 plus \$25 for delivery and a bit more for tax, ma'am?" I gasped. "Yes. Yes. That's about all I have," I said as I thought fleetingly about the cataract surgery I was saving up for.

"Well then, you just have your husband sitting on the front porch on Friday morning around 10 o'clock so's he can be there when my Dad and I

come to unload his new boat. We'll even put a bow on it for his birthday."

I started to cry. My old hand shook and I had to squint as I wrote out my cheque. Mathew swallowed hard.

"Ma'am. There's something you should know. This store was my Grampa's. He ran it for more than 30 years. He always promised to retire one day. Said he wanted to spend time relaxing and out fishing in a canoe. He ordered this one, custom, for himself last year but, well, just never took the time off to use it."

He swallowed even harder. "My Grampa died, sudden-like, just last week. He was only 68 years old. I think he'd be mighty happy that your husband will get this here canoe. My Dad thinks so too. You just have to make sure he uses it a lot, okay? Promise?"

I handed Mathew a Kleenex and we stood there together, quietly lost in our own thoughts for a moment, blowing our noses.

"I promise," I said as I dashed off to look for my dear sweet husband. [1024]