

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #52 - August 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.**

Two Right Feet

Patricia Craigen

It had been a violent argument. Hurtful words thrown with knowing aim. Painful truths that found intended soft spots.

And now I thrash on the bed, conjuring up anger to avoid tears. He lies ridiculously still, in obvious counterpoint to my raw emotions.

The king-size bed yawns wide. We are less than a yard apart. Sleep eludes us.

Right. Wrong. Does it matter? Another impasse. Years of practice, years of surprises. We are incompetent arbiters of our own dilemma. Minutes pass. An eternity.

And then a movement fills the silence. Tentative at first, me on my stomach, hubby on his back. Our toes touch. We pause, then our right feet hook together. Faithful friends.

In the stillness of the moment, in the unexpected truth, our world rights itself. [128]

“Almost Heaven” as in “Falling Short of”

Lad Moore

Moving to West Virginia was not what I envisioned would actually happen when I read the contest rules—an essay-auction by mail—and the prize—a totally free house precariously perched above Tallmansville Lick. “Send a photo of yourself and your spouse with your essay of no more than 256 words, describing why you would be the perfect person(s) to own this house.”

How could my story about Beth’s terrible childhood have been what would touch the owners—so horribly graphic and all?

Very desperate to get immigrants I thought, as I drove down to the licensing office to trade my Texas plates for those of the “Almost Heaven” state. I had two ten-year old cars, the 1974 Oldsmobile that Beth said was the last of the body-slamers, and my ’74 Corvette, the remnant of my youth—fading color, like my proud hair.

The ordeal took two hours. State law says that cars brought into West By God Virginia are levied a sales tax as if new—using current book value. “Double Taxation!” I protested to the clerk, busily popping her Doublemint.

“Six hundred-twelve Dollars,” she said, clicking her abused nails on the rubbed-raw Formica counter.

“Let me see the head guy,” I demanded.

“No head guy. Fishing at Stonecoal,” she said. “Caught six big trout Monday.”

“Did he fillet them?” I asked, hoping chumminess might lessen the penalty for bringing in previously-taxed cars.

“Nope—he was using worms I think,” said the woman who had just used finger-math to figure my tax. [256]

The Coiff-Off

Sandy Steinmann

At Rumplemeyers, purchasing caramels, a tiny man, no taller than Pamela, my nine year old, tapped my shoulder. “Ahem. Madame, I am Mario LaRusso. His heavily accented voice was melodic. “Your coiffure is intriguing,” he whipped out a card. “I’m a hairdresser.”

After small bits of chaff he suggested we stop for tea.

We sat at a Schrafft’s booth. He leaned across, playfully tousling my hair, and whispered, “shall we have an affair?”

His shiny leather boots had three inch heels.

“You might pick on someone your size,” I sniffed.

He glared at me. “I’m almost five feet.”

“A pee wee.”

“Fortunately, we’re the same size seated.” Winking, he said something in Italian.

I laughed, pretending to understand.

“A pot of of Earl Gray, please,” I told the waiter.

“In the old country, short men are sought after; their vilirity is legendary. If the women are unfortunate enough to be caught, the villagers stone them.”

I sipped tea, offered caramels.

“Tomorrow I sail to Paris. Why not come along?”

I was intrigued. Could I miss sewing circle? Find a nursemaid for Pamela? Would Nigel swallow my yarn that cousin Jane invited me to her spa?

“I’ll see.”

“Meet me here tomorrow at six,” he caressed my hair.

The next day, I arrived exhilarated, having hired a nursemaid and duped Nigel.

I sat alone until closing. Mario never showed up.

At home I found a note under the door.

“From Mario,” it read. The rest was in Italian.

I don’t understand Italian. I tore it up. [256]

Just Sand

M. Stanley Bubien

“It’s great!” he laughed. “Great!” I don’t know. He looked pretty, like, normal. More tan than most people, yeah, but fully clean-cut.

“And this one! Wonderful!”

But he was dorkin’ out big-time.

I’d been sitting on my towel, checking him out. He kept picking stuff off the sand and grinning and carrying-on like it was the bomb or something. Couldn’t see what it was all about, though—just sand and water to me. Okay, killer waves today, but man, that ain’t what he was all for.

“Beautiful!” He glanced around. Before I could turn away, our eyes met.

I went stiff.

“Come on!” He winked. “See for yourself.”

All right, so I was curious. I got up and marched down the shoreline. My parents wouldn’tve been too thrilled, but oh well.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Here!” he said, extending his hand with thumb and forefinger locked. I stared, like, wondering what was going on, but he gestured with his chin. Slowly, I stuck out my open palm, and he dropped something in it. It was totally tiny!

“Dude?” I lifted it to eye-level. “What the—” Sand! This bozo just gave me a piece of sand!

“Have you ever?” He grinned.

“Huh?”

“It’s unique! Hard. Cubic. And the coloring changes ever so slightly by the way the sunlight hits it. Astounding! Marvelous! You’ve never seen another like it!”

“Whoa, man. Are you, like, nuts or something?” I waved my arm. “There’s sand everywhere.”

He didn’t even look, not even—went dead silent and frowned. Full-on frowned. [256]

Enka

Jacinda Townsend

“Red light!” I wheeled around in the snow to face her and my breath rose into the February air.

I caught Frances standing there, perfectly still, her foot crunched into a small snowbank. A pool of grease stained the snow to her left. To her right a patch of frozen sleet glistened like marble.

We were little warriors then, me battling my mother’s second divorce from another mean drunk, and Frances battling a life just the wrong side of poverty. Both of us battling being the only two Black girls in a country school in the middle of a vast expanse of white Kentucky snow.

We waited for our mothers to get us from school, not with the others in the sixth grade hall but outside or in the auditorium. That’s where we turned cartwheels and where we bought Mello Yellos from the soda machine, me secretly hoping that my mother would be the first to come. That’s where we first noticed Enka, who always waited by herself.

Enka wore tattered clothes and had a dark spot on one of her front teeth; her stringy hair and pale skinny arms reminded me of a Raggedy Ann doll. She invaded Pikeville Elementary’s clannish world—just showed up one day in the middle of November with her weird accent. Gypsies, probably, my mother said. And, she said absently, you’d better stay away from that girl.

In the lunch room Frances and I passed by Enka, sitting at the end of a table. “Hey, Greenteeth,” I would say, and Frances would giggle, and we would both trip over to our own little end of a table where none of the White kids noticed us, let alone sat with us.

Biology class was our favorite time to make fun of Enka. Our teacher gave us daily seatwork while she sat at the front of the room, looking out the window and drinking from a leather flask. We were free to pass notes back and forth across the room. “Check out those shoes,” I would write to Frances, and she would look right at Enka and snicker. Enka always pretended she didn’t see us laughing.

That day she came outside in the cold February snow looking like she wanted to play our silly game. She smiled at us with that rotten tooth and

shoved her mittened hands deep in her pockets. “Hey stupid,” I said. My stepfather called me stupid so much I thought it was my name. “Better go in, stupid,” I said to her, “or that hole in your head might freeze over.”

She did go in. She went in and she didn’t come back out until her father came to get her at 4:30. Frances was already gone. I was waiting in the front hall, memorizing plaques in the school’s trophy case, when Enka’s father took her roughly by the arm and pulled her out the door. He looked wild and angry, and even from where I was I could smell the unmistakable cloud of gin. But Enka said nothing to him—just let herself be pulled. [512]

I Planned for This

M. Stanley Bubien

“I planned for this!” I cried toward the locked door. My words echoed off the metal—four inches thick and secured to cement walls—the reverberation masking my wavering inflection.

“You can’t stay in there forever!” Jones it was, head of security, flanked, no doubt, by a contingent of badged police officers. “You’re only making it worse,” his voice cracked through the wall-speaker. So cliché, this Jones, like he was playing cops-and-robbers in a ’50s B-movie.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to do it the hard way.” A perfectly in-character, premeditated response that—premeditation, my forte. Typically.

I frowned and clenched my fist at my temples.

“We have a warrant.”

“Back to work,” I sighed and double-checked my locking sequence, calculating an hour of decryption before Jones succeeded “the hard way.” I grasped the wrench, a clumsy instrument, especially for our Device, but time—ah, the irony!—often required such sacrifices.

A patch of red?

My hand convulsed, and the wrench clattered upon the tiling. Merton’s task this, I realized (irony upon irony!), bending to retrieve the tool—shining as if brand new, the bloodstain having been an illusion.

Jones switched tactics. “We know you did it!” he blared.

What could I expect? As a young man, I had mapped out our television B-movie schedule every Sunday. The “Sci-Fi” films tempted us into the science that eventually became our time machine—Merton and I, best friends, always analyzing the feasibility of even the most inane premise. Ours the noblest of endeavors: the search for knowledge, for ultimate truth.

“Brilliant deduction on your part,” I mumbled to Jones as I applied the wrench. Though a delicate operation, my awkward grasp required both hands for steadiness.

“And how feasible is God?”

I froze. Merton?

Yes, yes, I breathed, of course, a memory.

Certainly I cannot forget my initial, dumbfounded reaction. “Look, we weigh the probability of things like UFOs, ghosts, time travel,” Merton had said, flicking his black locks from his eyes for emphasis. “It’s Sunday! And we haven’t once considered God.”

The catalyst!

“To prove God,” I replied, “We would need to go back, visit some Biblical era.” But which one? And how? The first question, we answered in a week. The second, well, that required meticulous planning.

“Here,” I presented Merton with the sheet. “Four years, mathematics focus. Four more, physics.”

“We’ll need biology,” Merton stated, returning our coursework schedule, which I revised appropriately. Time travel is most serious—and exceedingly difficult—business, but we pursued my curriculum precisely.

Precisely, that is, until one week ago.

“I give up,” Merton had said in customarily simple—though somewhat matured—terms.

“Let me try,” I misinterpreted, relieving Merton of his wrench and brushing him aside to gain access to the Device.

“No, no.” He intervened. “It won’t work. I’ve been reevaluating our figures. We have at least three bad assumptions.”

“That’s all?” I asked facetiously. “Without my notebook, I can still cite more unprovable postulates than we have fingers and toes.”

“I’m not talking unprovable. I mean dead wrong!”

I stood slack, the shining, crescent-shaped metal dangling from my fingers. “We concisely projected the outcome.”

He drew his fingers over his lips. “Well, the board members disagree.”

“You went to the board?” I blurted.

“No, I wanted to tell you first. I appear tomorrow.”

“But they’ve never believed! They’ll cancel the project!”

“Yep.” Not one to mince words, he.

“You can’t!” I cried. “We’re so close!”

Merton shook his head and refused conversation, even as I pressed him. He met each protest with silence, which enraged me further—to the point of hefting the solid, icy form.

It was all so damnably unexpected.

“You killed him!” boomed Jones’ voice again from the intercom. I low-

ered the wrench, overcome by the bitterly irrational thought that a director stood nearby, poised beside his cameraman, motivating us by barking the names of false emotions through a bullhorn.

“You must be close now,” I replied, and considered mixing in a bit of that crazed laughter that mad scientists have become so famous for, but there is such a thing as too cliché.

Instead, I began the sequence of toggles to engage the Device—an awkward term that. But considering the full title from our PhD Thesis read “Modulating Temporal Field Displacement Device,” I never begrudged the truncation. Another of Merton’s ideas.

The final switch snapped off as I threw it. Damn him! I needed to stop with such thoughts. The hair on my arm stood on-end. “Damn—” I cut off mid-sentence, for it was not Merton’s specter, but the Field itself producing this anomaly.

Working? And upon the first try!

“You couldn’t stop me!” I cried toward the intercom and leapt headlong into the Field.

I must admit, I expected something terribly dramatic as I passed through. Not so. At one moment, I stood within the sterile walls of our laboratory and the next, my shoes threw up dust as I sought footing upon an ancient Israeli hillside.

My design neared fruition! Gaining my bearings, I charged the true prize, residing at the hilltop. I scantily noticed the be-robed and be-tunicked figures I passed, though I have no doubt they stared at my bizarrely futuristic attire.

I crested the hill and halted. There, suspended directly before me: O Knowledge! O Truth most divine!

Three bodies—dead or near death I could not surmise—stretched and hung against intersecting wooden beams—the proof, the answer to mankind’s universal question! Strange, though, what the mind fixes upon in such moments. For it was their hair, the dark locks that all three shared in common, which my gaze attended.

And instead of cheers of victory, I harkened the moans of expiring souls mingled with women weeping, their faces buried in the putrid soil surrounding the centermost cross. Not the sweet smell of success I caught, but in wisps so thick that they were almost visible, the stench of urine and feces mixed with

that of decaying flesh.

And in horror—oh, the horror!—I felt the chill of the implement I'd failed to release in my own time—the wrench of Merton's demise. [1024]