

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #53 - September 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.**

An Awkward Silence

Glynn Sharpe

I watched her draw while the dust from the country road billowed around the passenger seat window. She held the red felt-tipped pen in her slight hand like it was an extension of her self. Small squares of yellow memo pad paper were scattered in her lap. It was all I could scrounge up in hopes of keeping a four year old sufficiently occupied for the drive to her grandmother's house. Red suns, smiling faces and sunflowers bobbed gently with the moving car. Her face was somber and serious. I continued to drive on, glancing periodically at her as she sketched and ripped and arranged her tiny canvasses of art. Not a word was said and I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the silence. I felt it was my obligation to entertain her somehow and tried to engage her in conversation.

"So tell me sweetie," I asked, "what's your favourite colour?"

"I love all the colours," she said, not taking her eyes from her work.

"Okay. What's your favourite food then?"

"I love all the food," she replied.

I was intrigued and pressed on.

"What's your favourite day?"

She stopped for a moment and looked at me. Her eyes were clear green skies surrounded by flecks of yellow.

"I love everyday," she said and returned to her work. I watched her as she put the final strokes on what looked like a dog or cow.

I let her draw, uninterrupted, and listened to the lyrical ping of pebbles resonate off the underbelly of my car. [256]

Half the Battle

M. Stanley Bubien

My first son returned, and I, vigorous and youthful, embraced him. “I forgive you,” I said, and he smiled. I dressed him in fine cloth, and he paraded. I slaughtered fattened calf, and he feasted. I summoned singers, and he danced.

With arms open, I strode forward. “Come, reminisce,” and I indicated my sitting room.

He raised a palm. “I go to seek my fortune,” and he departed.

“He’ll be back,” my second daughter sniffed, grasping my two fingers.

My first son returned, and I, middle-age softened, embraced him. “I forgive you,” I said, and he smiled.

Dressing him in finer cloth than before, slaughtering a grown bull, and inviting famed musicians, I watched him enjoy.

Opening my arms, I sauntered forward, “Come, reminisce.”

Palm raised, he said in departure, “I go to increase my fortune.”

“He’ll be back, my second daughter scowled, arm about my waist.

My first son returned, and I, wintering with years, embraced him. “I forgive you,” I said, and he smiled.

Cloth, food, entertainment again.

Arms open, I wheeled chair forward, “Come, reminisce.”

Palm raised, “I depart to abide my fortune.”

“He’ll be back,” my second daughter shook her head, patting my shoulder.

My first son returned, and I, deathbed ridden, embraced him. “I forgive you,” I whispered.

His eyes darted in anticipation.

“Yet,” I tapped my bedside in invitation, “forgiveness is but half the battle.”

He frowned and returned to his fortune.

“Will he be back?” my second daughter asked, sharing a seat upon my bedding.

I held her hand. [256]

The Soliloquy

Jim O'Loughlin

From his seat in the back row, Kyle perchanced to think. I can't believe ENG 383 is Shakespeare and not advanced CAD/CAM. Who cares why Hamlet can't avenge his father's death? I hate my stepfather, but you don't catch me talking to myself about it.

Kyle looked down over the rows of students. Although, he thought, I did think about killing him after he made me get another job to pay for school. It was that time in church. I was embarrassed to be next to him with his singing all loud and out of tune. Every time the minister said something about "sacrifice," he'd start Amening. I remember thinking, when the hell did he ever sacrifice anything? He spends most of his life on the sofa sitting on his wide ass watching his wide screen TV. He won't even get up to buy his precious cheese curls. He makes me bring them home from work. This is supposed to be the best time of my life, and I spend half of it bagging groceries. How could Mom marry such a jerk? Right then I pictured the big ceiling fan in the church dropping down on his head. But then I thought, I wouldn't want him to die in a church. Maybe I could arrange it so his TV would crush him? Well, I don't know that I really wanted to kill him. I just thought about it a lot.

Kyle glanced at his watch. My God, he thought, another half-hour? Won't this class ever end? [256]

Dry

M. Stanley Bubien

The waves crashed in, clapping cobbles each upon the other, and scattering even the largest upward against the shoreline. The vast sea, spread beyond the reaches of vision, caressed my exposed shoulders with a cloud of mist.

“But my spirit feels dry,” I told my companion.

“How?” he asked.

I pointed. Rocks rested, salt-crusted, yet outside the whitewater’s reach.

“As dry as stone,” I answered.

With two hands, he lifted a grey, elliptical form. He winked, as was his wont, before slamming its center upon a protruding spike. The cobble cracked asunder, and he presented a single half to me, indicating the freshly-exposed moisture within.

“Rocks are always wet,” he mugged, “I should know.”

My head shook, my lips down-turned, I gazed eastward into the barren desert sands.

“As dry as dust,” I replied.

“C’mon.”

We soon found ourselves parched, ankle-deep, and blasted by the Scirocco, leaning upon a pair of shovels. My companion stabbed the ground. He leveled his burden, and discarded the pile of sand over his shoulder.

“But your hands.”

“Wrists,” he corrected, presenting the wounds. “Been a while now. They’ve healed up quite nicely.”

I joined the labor. Knee-deep, waist-deep, chest-deep. When his shovel slurped mud, he laughed and dumped the sopping soil over my head like a baptism.

“Wet yet again,” he guffawed.

The caked earth covered my locks, but I resisted the temptation of sipping at the dripping liquid.

“Dry as bone, then,” I shook the muck off.

Casually, he shrugged, and presented a torch. The red tongues licked

the catacomb walls, scoring them with carbon, a contrast to the ivory of lost loves decaying at his scarred feet. Even through the odor-masking smoke, the place reeked of death.

“Mold.”

“What?”

“That’s what you smell,” my companion hefted a jawbone. “It’s the spore of fungus, sucking life from the dampness sealed inside this desiccation.”

I held my nose. Before it turned upward with disdain, we witnessed the fall of night; a silver orb rising to drift the starfield.

“Dry as a moon!” I burst exultantly.

My companion offered the open-palm of invitation, gesturing skyward. But at my ever widening eyes, he relented.

“A citation instead, then, my friend. Scientists. Take their word for it, they’ve discovered water.”

“Harumph,” I frowned, a well-read and well-schooled man.

“Forget Mars too.”

“Jupiter,” I baited. “All gas.”

“Oh, and mist isn’t moist?” He touched my exposed shoulder for emphasis.

“Pluto.”

“Ice planet.”

I collapsed upon my haunches, though still focusing upon the heavens. If only I could explain, to speak without metaphor upon metaphor failing me in my empty misery.

I sat up.

“Dry as vacuum!”

Beside me, he rested palms quietly upon my skin. “Space is not a perfect vacuum. Out there drift the tiniest of molecules. Some are even water.”

At that I buried my head into my hands. “But my spirit,” I said, voice muffled in return, “feels dry.”

My companion’s fingers squeezed, and as he whispered toward my ear, I felt the moist warmth of his breath. “I hear you. And I know exactly what you mean.” [512]

The Outing of Nurse and Charge

Laura J. Cutler

They walk apart from one another, Nurse and Charge. Nurse is ahead, marching down the lane with military precision, despite the flowing skirt. Charge lags behind, plucking daisy petals. And she scrutinizes the earth for other signs of life. She likes the way worms stretch and stretch until they snap, popping the bulbous divisions of army ants. The most satisfaction comes from flipping shiny beetles onto their backs, holding them in place with a twig and stripping off their flailing legs. The flying things frustrate Charge. It makes her feel hot and bubbling inside that the flying things are so free from constraint, so untouchable.

“We have a scant half an hour, a bare thirty minutes,” reminds Nurse without turning around. “If you want to make it as far as the beach, if you want to see the ocean, you best hurry up, you’ll need to stop dawdling.”

Charge has long, strong legs and catches up in seven strides.

“Don’t forget the arrangement, mind you remember the deal,” says Nurse. “You see the ocean and you must draw prettier pictures. You promised to paint Doctor a picture of the ocean with a yellow, yellow sun and blue, blue water.”

They walk on. Nurse hums “All Things Bright and Beautiful.” Charge thinks about the free ones.

“Smell the salt air, inhale the ocean. It’s close, just there.”

Indeed, the woods finish. Upright trees become logs, packed soil becomes unruly sand. Grey sand that spills into gray water that collides with gray sky.

“Look,” instructs Nurse. “God’s greatest ocean, the Creator’s bathtub.” Nurse chuckles at her whimsy. “Now go feel the water, dip in your hand. I shall sit here on this log, rest on Creator’s couch.”

Charge moves to the shore until the water licks her toes. She understood the beach would be warm: warmer than the stone courtyard and brighter than the sterile dormitory. She had always understood there would be gallop-

ing horses and liling sailboats, things that were free like that. There was nothing free. There was nothing but Charge and Nurse and gray.

“We must go soon, must leave shortly,” calls Nurse from her dead tree. “I have to get back to work, to give out the afternoon meds.”

It is easy because Charge is so much bigger and stronger. She pins down Nurse’s torso so her arms and legs flail like the beetles’. The same arms and legs that entwined with Doctor’s in the artroom as Charge watched from the closet. Charge’s Doctor. But even Charge can not pull off the flailing limbs. Aaaah, but the tongue, there wiggling and fat like a juicy pink maggot. It stretches and snaps and undulates by itself on the sand. Nurse obliges by screaming, makes her mouth an inviting receptacle for the gray, gray sand.

After, Charge begins walking west along the shore in hopes of catching up with a brighter, warmer palette. She walks, scrutinizing the gray for flashes of yellow sun or blue sky to paint that pretty picture for Doctor, finally understanding she’s always been untouchable, but never free. [512]