

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #55 - November 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 Working Mother Finds Success

M. Stanley Bubien

She lifted her favorite photograph from the desk. Trembling, she hugged it. "I'm sorry," she whispered. [16]

Storm of the Kodak Moment

Lad Moore

The worst storm ever rolled mercilessly out of Pamlico Sound—its darkness giving the scattering of snowy gulls on Lake Mattamuskeet an eerie contrast—like styrofoam sailing against black velvet. At the bottom of the encroaching wall, as if a rising curtain, fifty feet of jade-green sky boiled in rile like yesterday's jimmy crabs.

In an instant, tents were billowing like flapping towels pinned to a clothesline. Coffeepot parts mixed with Doritos-Chip missiles in the air, appropriate to the cries of alarm and the barking of a very confused Quigley—scuttling to the safety of the cement culvert. People still in nightclothes were scrambling—as would ants, disturbed by sudden exposure of their hiding place. Lightening shards sent tracers in the early dawn—illuminating clouds that bulged with rain and stones of ice.

White golf-ball hail began to pepper the Jeep Cherokee—the one weather sin I could not forgive. Despite my protest, I had to yield in helplessness to the magnitude of the wrenching-out of the heavens.

My camera snapped the awesome power of the storm at its height, as raw nature humbled us to hide in the steel caves beneath the Fairfield Bridge.

It was over. I developed the storm photos that same day—could plain film do it justice? Yes, there it was—its fury truly captured in glows of green and streaks of yellow born of St. Elmo's fire. Now—when I say it was the biggest storm ever, I mean just that—huge!

The negative weighed four pounds. [256]

Crutch

M. Stanley Bubien

The fight only lasted a minute, two on the outside. And over what? Unbelievable!

“Basically it comes down to this,” Rob had said. Typical, his reducing things to their basics. Funny thing was, every time we argued about God, those basics changed!

“What’s it gonna be today?” I mumbled, one foot in the doorway, the other on my porch. This used to drive Ellen crazy: us up at all hours, philosophizing at the top of our lungs—keeping her awake. Oh, I blinked and swallowed, how much harder these conversations have become—

“Huh?” I asked, realizing Rob had spoken.

He smirked, “Nice try. But you can’t ignore me!” His laugh burst like a cannon, and he grabbed me by the shoulders and squeezed; it was like getting a massage from the Incredible Hulk.

“Boy, you’re tense,” he said.

I rubbed my neck and glanced upstairs toward our—my—empty bedroom. “Go on,” I told him, but, with sudden foresight, added, “Be careful though.”

“Okay,” he pinched his lips together. “It’s like, well, Christians can be so... so... weak minded...”

With that, I knew what was coming. My vision blurred, and I ground my teeth together.

“It’s mainly... you know... a crutch. Um, cliché as that sounds,” he shrugged with open hands.

Both fists clenched, I raised them and exploded, “Crutch!?! God damn you!”

I leapt from the porch and pounded him in the face. He stumbled, and another blow sent him to the cement. I kicked him in the ribs twice, though the second missed completely as he rolled aside. He jumped up, swung, and landed one in my chest.

Stepping back for footing, I caught a sprinkler at the very moment his left hook connected. I heard the femur crack, but my head slamming the ce-

ment erased all other memory away.

Even now, laying with gauze wrapped around my brow, leg hanging in traction, I had no idea how I'd gotten to the hospital.

"I, um, brought you in," Rob said, stepping into my room and setting a wrapped gift—strangely long—beside my bed. I noticed his bruised cheek and swollen lip.

Heaving a sigh, I lifted a hand to my forehead, but jerked as I touched the wound. "Ow!"

His eyes darted about as he tried not to smile. But his expression soon melted. "Look," he said. "I should've known. I mean, you've been having a rough time since Ellen's death..." His voice trailed off.

I remained quiet, not sure how to respond. I mean, he didn't believe in God, how could he understand? But I figured, oh well, and said, "Yeah, God's—uh, I'm like abandoned, alone. That's been..." my throat constricted, and I finished quickly, "yeah, rough." I stared at the sheets.

After a pause, Rob reached down and produced his gift. "No hard feelings."

I tore the paper away.

"You know," he touched his lip. "That was the best argument for God you ever gave."

I clenched the brand new crutch with both hands, and our laughter grew so loud, it echoed into the hall. [512]

The Monster in My Bedroom

Augustus Remier

It started a couple of weeks ago. Some nights when I would go to bed, I would hear things. Noises, bumps, scratching, tapping, whispering. Some times it even sounded like it was coming from inside the house. And I would see shadows across my window. I knew I couldn't tell 'cause no one would believe me and that would just make it worse. Then one night, a monster came into my bedroom. It was a Tuesday. I remember the day 'cause it was my birthday. Mommy gave me a cupcake with a candle in it. Daddy didn't say anything. Sometimes it's better that way. But that night after I went to bed, the monster came in through the window. He was dressed nice, but was very dirty. I pretended like I was asleep, but I kept my eyes open a little so I could watch him. I was very scared and tried not to breathe, or move, or think. He walked over to the crib where my little brother sleeps and bent over it. I couldn't see what he was doing. He stood there for a minute and then he left, crawling out through the window. The next morning, my mom came in to get Bobby and started yelling for Dad (he's not really my dad, he's Bobby's dad. I never knew my real dad). Ambulances came and it was very busy. I tried to tell mom about the monster, but she said I was just having a bad dream and none of that really happened but every night after that I lock my window and my door. A couple of days later we all dressed up nice and went to church for Bobby. Ever since then, Mommy cries a lot and looks at me sad. Dad spends more time at work which is good 'cause when he's home, he's very angry. They argued last Saturday and I haven't seen dad since. Dad said it was my fault that Bobby was dead, that I was jealous of all the attention he was getting. "Bobby wasn't on his stomach when we put him to bed that night, but that's how you found him wasn't it?" Dad asked. Mom said that wasn't true, that Bobby died because of Sids. I don't know who that is. I thought maybe that was the monster's name, but Mommy always said there was no monster so I didn't ask her about it.

Tonight the monster came back.

I tried to be quiet, but he came over and stood at my bed. He said, "I know you're awake. The other night wasn't the first time I've been here, but

tonight will be my last. I know that you're not happy here. Do you want to come with me? I promise no one will hurt you anymore." Before I could think, I nodded my head and everything got dark. I see myself lying on my bed. I think of visiting my mother before I leave but the night is no longer young and there are many children on this block. [512]

Two Monsters

M. Stanley Bubien

There are two monsters that scare hell out of me. First, Frankenstein. Nope, not because he uses his bare hands to tear people apart for no other reason than that they piss him off (a quality any self-respecting male like me secretly admires). But because he gets all weepy and sad around flowers. What is that?

“Honey?”

Frankie, though, has the distinct advantage of being obviously make-believe (3am nightmares notwithstanding). But the second? Real as they come, this monster was colloquially known as “the little woman.” Undeniably corporeal, even after the accident: my wife, Jenevera.

“Oh, honey!”

I gazed up at our marriage certificate, framed by vows spelled out in Jenevera’s flawless cursive. Not “till death do us part.” Oh no, I don’t mince words, not me. I’d been so enraptured at the time, I convinced my then-fiancee to run with “forever.”

I slapped my forehead.

“Dear?”

“Be down in a second!” I cried, collecting yesterday’s dirty clothes, strewn about the bedroom floor in whatever random locations my “little woman” had cast them. Keeping the garments—underwear especially!—at arm’s length, I held my breath as I bounded into the washroom.

“Breakfast is ready!”

As I exited the washroom, the door slammed and I stiffened. Shaking my head, I marched toward the kitchen. But before I reached my destination, she popped out from behind the bureau and cackled, “I made your favorite!”

I jumped and stifled a scream. Hand against my racing heart, I swallowed several times in succession. “I told you never to do that!”

She bit her lip, which cracked so badly I had to close my eyes. “I’m... sorry honey,” Jenevera quivered. “I was... just... so... excited...”

Eyes still closed as I tried to eradicate the vision of her patchy black hair, and that blanched, skull-drawn expression, I replied, “Okay.”

con and eggs being edible in almost any form. Usually. Applying thumb to molars, I scratched off a stray piece of carbon. “And you used to be such a good cook.”

Jenevera’s brow wrinkled and her cheeks sagged halfway down her neck

I held up my hands. “No, no, I didn’t mean...” My sentence trailed into a sigh of relief as her expression lifted. Of all damnable things a falling piano would leave completely intact, it had to be the ears!

I shoveled the rest of the food down, only gagging once, a tie for personal best. Pushing the plate aside like it was my marriage, I had a sudden urge: three simple words, “I’m leaving you,” and the jig’d be up. But before I could even clear my throat, Jenevera rasped, “I’m thinking of inviting the Lasseters to dinner.”

“Look, um, sweetie,” I coughed loudly into my fist. “Ahem. No one comes over any more.”

“It isn’t my cooking, is it?”

I blinked.

“It is my cooking!”

“No!” I blared, the strength of my voice aided by the fervor of complete and total honesty. “That has absolutely nothing to do with it!”

She thrust her gaze toward me with a bone-snapping jerk. I cringed. “Truly?” she looked as hopeful as dilapidated eye sockets ever could. “I was afraid... So you think I should call them?”

“Why the sudden interest in entertaining?”

“Oh honey, don’t you know what day it is?”

I froze, and slowly lifted my watch. I read the date off the little square at the three o’clock position: 31. “Halloween,” I breathed.

“Our anniversary!” she exclaimed. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

“Um... uh...” I stammered, unable to offer a defense—I had forgotten, doubly stupid, as I’d just been looking at our marriage certificate. And as earlier, I slapped my forehead. Doubly—

“To think,” Jenevera said, waving a dishrag at me in her fit. “It’s twice as special for us.”

“Well,” I squared my shoulders. “I wouldn’t say—”

“Not again!” she screeched. “How often do couples get a second chance? I mean, I should have died.”

“You did die, darling,” I corrected. “I was there, remember? The piano crushed you.” No need for details; we both understood the accident. It was the part after the accident we had trouble with.

“I know!” she shrieked, jabbing an accusing finger my direction. “It was your idea get married on Halloween!”

Again, I could offer no defense. And if my theory held true—it being a twisted mishmash of our wedding date, our unique vows, and the accident occurring on our seventh anniversary—it was as much my fault as anyone’s.

“Here’s to lucky number seven,” I growled. And the next thing I knew, I was wearing the dishrag.

“You think I wanted to end up like this?” she waved her hand. “All stinky, and... decaying and...” Her voice cracked, and she began to cry.

“Ahhh,” I stammered.

“And...” she continued. “So... ugly!” It sounded just like the first time I’d heard her cry. It always did. I swallowed, lifted myself out of my chair, and stood there, staring.

“Honey—”

“And I was happy to just be... just...”

I hunkered over and put an arm around her—knowing I’d have enough time to add my shirt to the wash. “I’m sorry, honey,” I whispered. “C’mon, tonight’s the one night nobody notices. Let’s go out.”

She sniffed.

I brushed her cheek—as much for comfort as to rub away a sliver of hanging flesh. “You know you always win the costume contests.” That got a grin—it was true, death makes one helluva costume. Her tears finally slackened, and she buried her head in my shirt. Instead of plugging my nose, I pulled her close, and breathed sweet-nothings into her ear. Still, I caught a whiff of desiccated flesh, which awakened a single, unbidden thought.

Curse that Frankenstein and his damnably weak will! [1024]