

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #56 - December 2000

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Story Bytes

Very Short Stories
Lengths a Power of 2

Editor

M. Stanley Bubien
<editor@storybytes.com>

Editorial Assistant

Kevin Athey
<kathey@pobox.com>

Web Site

<<http://www.storybytes.com>>

Weekly Mailing List

1 to 2 stories weekly via e-mail
<subscribe@storybytes.com>

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**Story Bytes better
than sound bites.**

Three Story House

Patricia Craigen

Bethany slams the door and stomps up the wooden stairs to her attic bedroom. She throws herself back onto the futon and envies the clouds that laze past her skylight. The folding of diapers and sleepers will have to wait.

Libby watches her daughter flounce away and braces against the noise of the slamming door. She sighs as the vibration rocks her second floor suite, and then reaches for her glass of Chardonnay. This attempt at fortification fuels her as she looks up and dials the number of her current lover.

On the ground floor, Betty feels baby Elizabeth startle at the racket from the slamming door, but that echoing sound of anger is lost in the murmur of great-grandma's lullaby. Elizabeth and Betty continue to rock away. [128]

Letter Never Sent

W.H. Merklee

I felt sorry for Mr. Sorensen, always away on business with three beautiful blonds at home. Jen was platinum, Abbie was strawberry, and yours varied from time to time.

I liked flirting with Abbie, telling her that she and I would go out when she was a little older if her sister didn't mind.

Alone in your house with Jen one night, all I could think to do was teach her how to play Stairway to Heaven on the piano until two o'clock in the morning. I thought I was being a gentleman; my mind rattled with her stories about her rapacious ex-boyfriend. If I could do it over, we'd play the piano naked.

Though I coveted your daughters, I think I loved you the most, and I think you knew. We were able to talk about anything, that I was still a virgin and that you really shouldn't have worn white. I was somehow honored that I could drop by and join in your afternoon conversations with the neighborhood women. And grateful for your understanding when you found my friend Jeff and I parked in front of your house late one night smelling of blackberry brandy and talking nonsense after Jen and I had broken up.

I remember coming by after school one afternoon to ask you to stop taking my side in the break-up, and your smiling remark that we should be careful lest the neighbors start calling you Mrs. Robinson.

I still think about what might have happened had I seen the movie. [256]

Five Minutes in Heaven

Gary Holland

The helicopter ride was free, courtesy of the US Army. I piled into the cabin with my fellow grunts, six to a bird. We leaned back onto leaden packs, our legs dangling out the wide-open doorways. Each soldier had a big-screen front-row seat to reality. It promised the ride of a lifetime, maybe the last ride of a lifetime.

The crewchief sat lotus-like against the wall. He peered omnisciently from beneath his olive-drab helmet mumbling a private joke to the pilots through his hands-on mouthpiece. And when all were finally settled he jerked his leather-gloved thumb straight toward the ceiling, toward the high life somewhere beyond.

The rotor blades whined into overdrive, flapped and shuddered a few seconds, then pitched sharply forward. A steady vacuum sucked us skyward while the crewchief raised his hand head-high, palm to his passengers, fingers spread five-wide. "Five minutes," he mouthed. The sky ride would last five minutes.

The moment we cleared the landing zone the door gunners tilted their machine guns straight ahead, locked in an opening round, then rocked off a quick burst into the fertile green triangle below. Suddenly we were heaven high.

The treetops raced a hundred miles an hour beneath our boots. The wind cooled the earthly sweat from our faces so quickly the leftover salt crinkled and crusted around our eyes. Wide-open shirts, pack straps and boonie hats all flapped merrily in the breeze. Then the real fun began.

Roaring as low and as fast as we could we skimmed the treetops in a blur. We blew through the canyons, floated the ridgelines, free fell down the backsides to the shimmering rice paddies below. Over and over we hurdled from weightlessness to double gravity and back. We were giddy as school-boys on a Coney Island coaster soaring dangle-foot over the secret landscapes of Vietnam. Then, without warning, the sky ride came to a halt.

Our goose had landed. The crewchief jerked his leather-gloved thumbs toward the doorways and mouthed, "Out!" We landed knee-deep in the sludge.

Hell hadn't frozen over since the last time we were there. The heat and the insects were waiting to greet us.

For the next thirty days we struggled up fetid canyons, waist deep in blood-sucking leaches, clawed our way over the same ridgelines we floated over just days before, then stumbled down the same backsides by our bootstraps, exhausted, demoralized, and torn. We bitched and groaned, itched and stung, baked and burned. The dung flies ambushed by daylight, the mosquitoes assaulted by night. We ran blood and pus and sweat by the gallons. We grew abscesses the size of silver dollars. Some men fainted, some men cried, and some men vomited in the heat. When our stench was too potent to hide in the jungle, someone ordered us back for a bath.

We flew out the way we flew in. But somehow the thrill was gone. They would clean us, heal us, fatten us a bit. Then the life cycle of a grunt would begin once again: five minutes in heaven—thirty days in hell. [512]

Invitations to Dinner

Lincoln Donald

“**W**hat are you doing here?” I asked in surprise as I entered the living room after returning home.

A small, shrivelled old woman, dressed like a bundle of cleaning rags, sat on the sofa in the evening gloom. She had the air of someone who did a lot of waiting around but I had no idea who she was or what she was doing there, although there was something vaguely familiar about her; it was almost as though she was a shrunken, older and more wrinkled version of someone I knew. I quickly turned on some lights but still didn’t recognise her.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she replied tartly. “I want you to arrange a dinner party.”

“I see! You want me to give you a meal? I was about to cook something. I should be able to find enough in the freezer for both of us. Would you like to join me?”

“That wasn’t really what I meant but I suppose we could discuss it over dinner.”

“Can I offer you a drink. Sherry perhaps?”

“Thank you.”

“Sweet or dry?”

“Oh sweet, always sweet.”

I poured her drink and checked the freezer.

“It will have to be pasta with a tomato and basil sauce, I’m afraid.”

“That sounds lovely.”

We had eaten almost in silence but as we sat finishing our cheap white wine I asked her to tell me about the dinner party she wanted me to arrange.

“I’m offering you the opportunity to host a party for any five people you would enjoy sharing a leisurely meal with.”

“All from here in town?”

“No, not necessarily. From anywhere you like—here or overseas.”

“But how will I know they will be available, and how will they get here?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Just leave it to me.”

“When?”

“Any time that will suit you.”

“What if that isn’t convenient for the guests?”

“I will see that it is,” she replied so firmly and with such authority that I believed her.

“But what if I invited the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury on Easter Sunday?”

“It might be straining the friendship but yes, they would be here.”

“Does it have to be here? I would have to cook. That wouldn’t leave much time to entertain my guests.”

“No. It can be anywhere you like. Restaurant, hotel, wherever.”

“I think room service in the Presidential Suite at the Hyatt Hotel would be best, but I’ll need a little time to decide who I would most like to invite. How long do I have?”

“I would like to know by this time tomorrow evening.”

“Come and eat with me again tomorrow night and I’ll let you know who you should invite.”

“Thanks. I will, but I must go now.”

As I led the way down the hall, she said, “I quite like fish and chips, you know.”

When I turned to usher her out she was nowhere to be seen but I felt strangely confident that she would return the following evening.

Now, who should I invite? [512]

Thankful Thing

M. Stanley Bubien

I charged into my Grandad's workshop, taking the corner at full-speed because I knew the brand new shoes my parents got me for Thanksgiving could handle it.

"Grandad!" I cried, skidding to a stop on the sawdust and tugging at his sleeve. "Grandad!"

He pushed his glasses against his face and peered down.

"Did you really build the Spruce Goose?" My voice shook.

"Why yes," he rumbled like gravel. "I worked on it during the War."

"The world's biggest plane! And you made it!"

Tapping the head of his hammer into the palm of his hand, he replied, "I didn't build the whole thing. I had help, of course. Lots of it."

All I could do was stare and say, "Cool!"

He chuckled. "Maybe I can tell you about it later." He waved the hammer over a two-legged chair. "I have to finish this up before dinner. But soon as I'm done, I'll be in."

"All right!" I blurted, and sprinted back toward the house. This was perfect! I'd found my Thankful Thing for the year. And tonight, when we'd gone around the table and everyone else had shared theirs, I'd stand up and announce that my very own Grandad helped build the hugest plane in the world! Maybe I'd even throw in some facts. I already knew something about the plane, we visited it once when they had it parked by the Queen Mary. I wasn't sure of any real specifics—but I knew a way to find out!

"Dad!" I gasped, still a little winded. "Can I use your computer?"

He blinked at me.

"To go on the Internet. I want to look something up."

"Let's ask your grandmother."

She gave the go-ahead, and my dad soon had the modem buzzing away. The first site I found had everything I needed.

"Dad, did you know it used the largest engines ever made?"

"Hmm?" From over the top of his newspaper, he glanced toward the kitchen.

"The Spruce Goose," my mother explained between shucking potato

skins.

“And it was all wood!” I continued. “And its wingspan was bigger than a football field!” My voice faded slowly as I continued reading. All the while, though, I kept thinking “And Grandad built it!”

“Too bad it only flew once,” my dad said.

“What?”

“Um, nothing. Have you found out how they moved it up north?”

“They flew it, of course.”

My father lowered his paper. He stared at me with his lips drawn tightly together. “Maybe you should keep reading,” he suggested, and buried himself once more behind the newsprint.

I shrugged. After going over the specifications again, I clicked a “History” link. The page loaded, and the headline read “World’s Biggest Plane. World’s Biggest Flop.”

“Wha...?” I whispered, and began skimming the article as fast as I could. When I reached the part about the plane only flying once—for a lousy mile!—my jaw went slack.

Finishing the article, I hunched against the table. All I could remember were words like “disaster,” “failure,” and “embarrassment.”

And Grandad built it.

Without turning off the computer, I got up and went out the front door. I think my father called after me, but I ignored him. Slumping onto the porch steps, I pulled my knees to my chest and dropped my head onto my arms. I could hear my own breathing, echoing off my chest like it went through a loudspeaker.

“Whatcha doin’ there son?”

I bolted upright. Grandad stood over me, rubbing his palms against his overalls.

“Er, nothin’,” I replied.

“Yep. That’s what it looked like,” he laughed. “I finished up that chair. Need to give the glue a bit to dry, but it should be sturdy enough before dinner.” He sniffed the air. “Well, will you get a load of that.”

I furled my brow and squinted, but caught a whiff of the Thanksgiving turkey.

“Reminds me of the Spruce Goose.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

Grandad lowered himself beside me, “So, what do you want to know?”

What part I worked on? Well, let me tell you, I started as a wing carpenter. . .”

He went on and on about attaching this and cutting that, but most of it just flew right by. The only thing I paid attention to was his tone—he was so cheerful, I knew he didn’t get it.

“Ah, what a colossal sight she made,” he concluded.

“Yeah,” I mumbled.

“You know,” he tapped his chin. “I ain’t never shared this one before. I think I’m gonna use this for my Thankful Thing!”

“You can’t!” I blurted, and instantly covered my mouth.

“Eh? Why not?”

I dragged my sole against the concrete, but the squeaking made me shudder. “It’s just. . .”

“Yes? Go ahead. I’m listening. You know I’m always listening.”

“It was a total failure!” I cried. “It didn’t even fly.”

“Sure she did. I saw her take off.”

“Oh c’mon! A mile? I mean, that’s not really flying.” And before he could answer, I went on. “I read all about it. A total failure! Some people even thought the guy who paid for it—”

“Howard Hughes.”

“Yeah, that guy—that he did it to take the government’s money. What a jerk!”

Grandad remained still. He wheezed slightly, and twisted his lips into a variety of strange faces. Finally he shrugged and dropped a hand on my shoulder.

“Ah. Sure, she bombed out. But it was history—and all because she didn’t fly! Ever think of that?”

I hesitated, but shook my head.

“Besides,” he indicated the house, the yard, and the workshop. “I’ve made lots of things since then—some with your grandma’s help, of course.” He grinned. “And I even got some of them right.” Looking me in the eye, he patted my shoulder and winked. “And those were the most important ones!”

With that, he stood up, stretched his back, and walked into the house. I stayed on the porch, considering what he said. But as I wondered, something else started to bother me. Grandad had taken my Thankful Thing, and I needed to think of a new one before dinner! [1024]

For Robert Hejlik.