

Story Bytes

Very Short Stories - Lengths a power of 2.

Issue #33 - January 1999

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Story Bytes

Very Short Stories
Lengths a Power of 2

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Back Issues (PDF)

Dating From January, 1999
<<http://www.storybytes.com/view-pdf/>>

Back Issues (HTML)

Dating From March, 1996
<<http://www.storybytes.com/view-month/>>

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**Story Bytes better
than sound bites.**

Free Man Now

M. Stanley Bubien

Year's passed since'n his try, but I's recallin', specially with this'm headline readin' "Jailbreak Plan" right afronta me. Them's suckers, they's never knowed him, never done moment-one'n his cell. 'Tweren't no jailbreak, says me—not like them's ameanin' anyways.

"Somebitch," he be'd mumblin', breathless like, starin' on that there wall—or past it—I's not so sure. "I'm going over."

"You can't!" I's blatherin', but keepin' to quiet too. "'Tain't been done."

My cellmate's anoddin' now, without turnin', "nobodys's climbed that wall, but I'm gonna be the first."

"You ain't!" I says, afeared for's life.

"I'm breathing prison air seventeen years," he's scowlin' on me. "It's grown as stale as life. And if they have their way, I'm never tasting freedom again."

Before I's answers, here's the warden, outta nowheres! "Son," says he. "Don't even think about trying." And I's all stiff when he's agrabbin' my pal's shoulder. "I would hate to see you fall. Because if you ever touch that wall"—he squeezed then, hard like—"they'll carry you out."

Then they's lookin' into the other's eyes till a guard's nervous and grunts, "sir, problem?"

"No, I don't think so."

And he's aleavin' and hasty-like I'm kickin' dust over my cellmate's spit.

"I'll have freedom," he's sayin'. "One way or another."

I throwed that paper down, and ahundredth time, it smacks floor, recallin' to me that gunfire. Yep, they's acallin' it "Jailbreak Plan" but I knows—better'n them, I knows. I's callin' it suicide.

But 'chever way you's alookin't it, he's a free man now. [256]

*Inspired by, and partially excerpted from, "The Wall" by H. Howard.
Thanks also to Johnny Cash.*

Living Will

M. Stanley Bubien

“**S**ince she lacks a living will,” the lawyer told me. “As executor of your mother’s estate, the decision falls to you.”
As he spoke, the air conditioner shut off. Arms crossed to stave off the lingering chill, I gazed upon the pen he had previously offered, but gave no response.

Presently, he said, “Let me ask you a question.”

I nodded.

He lifted a sheet from his desk. “It seems the Alzheimer’s is so bad, it’s left your mother bedridden and unable to communicate.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Of course,” he replied. “Given this, are you sure that you have the resources to care for her?”

“Resources?”

“As executor, the burden of your mother’s care is also your responsibility.”

A vision of my one-bedroom apartment flashed unbidden to mind, and I shivered.

“Factor in, as well, the absence of quality-of-life.” He dropped the paper, causing it to drift forward, coming to rest directly before me. “Consent to Euthanize” stood out in boldfaced type atop the page.

Sighing, I leaned upon the desk and lifted the pen.

“Sometimes,” he intoned. “This is the most compassionate solution.”

I eyed the lawyer under my brow. The air started again, and in my position, it blew down my neck. Without signing, I replaced the pen and stood to suppress another shiver. “I need a break. I’ll be back to...” I indicated the papers, “finish up in ten minutes or so.”

He tapped his chin with his fingers.

“But before I return,” I said. “Can you please turn on the heat?” [256]

Arthur McBride

Traditional

Sources: Bob Dylan, Danny Spooner & Mick Farrel

Me and my fellow, one Arthur McBride,
We went a-strollin' down by the seaside,
Mark now what followed and what did betide,
For it bein' Christmas mornin'
Now, for recreation, we went on a tramp,
And we met Sergeant Napier and Corporal Vamp
And a little wee drummer who roused up the camp,
For the day bein' pleasant and charmin'.

“Good morning, good morning,” the Sergeant he cried.
“And the same to you, gentlemen,” we did reply,
Intending no harm but meant to pass by,
For it bein' Christmas mornin'
“But,” says he, “my fine fellows, if you will enlist,
Ten guineas in gold I'll stick to your fist,
A crown in the bargain to shake off the dust,
And drink the Queen's health in the morning.

“For a soldier, he leads a very fine life,
And he always is blessed with a charming young wife,
And he pays all his debts without sorrow or strife,
And he always lives pleasant and charmin'.
And a soldier, he always is decent and clean,
In the finest of clothing he's constantly seen,
While other poor fellows go dirty and mean,
And sup on thin gruel in the morning.”

“But,” says Arthur, “I wouldn't be proud of your clothes,
For you've only the lend of them, as I suppose,
But you dare not change them one night, for you know
If you do, you'll be flogged in the morning,

And although that we're single and free,
We take great delight in our own company,
We have no desire strange places to see,
Although that your offers are charming.

“And we have no desire to take your advance,
All hazards and dangers we barter on chance,
For you'd have no scruples for to send us to France,
Where we would get shot without warning,”
“Oh no,” says the Sergeant, “I'll have no such chat,
And neither will I take it from snappy young brats,
For if you insult me with one other word,
I'll cut off your heads in the morning.”

And Arthur and I, we soon drew our hogs,
And we scarce gave them time to draw their own blades
When our trusty shillelaghs came over their heads
And bid them take that as fair warning.
And their old rusty rapiers that hung by their sides,
We flung them as far as we could in the tide,
“The waters may pit these,” cried Arthur McBride,
“And temper their edge in the mornin'!”

And the little wee drummer, we beat to his shoe,
And we made a football of his rowdy-dow-do,
We cast it a-tide with their rusty swords two,
And bade it a tedious returning,
And we havin' no money, paid them off in cracks.
We showed no respect to their two bloody backs,
And we lathered them there like a pair of wet sacks,
And left them for dead in the morning.

Me and my fellow, one Arthur McBride,
As we went a-strollin' down by the seaside,
“To the Devil I'd curse you,” Arthur he cried,
“Except for it bein' a fine Christmas mornin'.” [512]

Conviction

Mimi Carmen

This is the saddest day of my life for I'm leaving Chen Li. Perhaps I should leave a note. The details I haven't decided on. "Dear Chen Li, I'm leaving... take care of yourself. Love John." From now on each evening I'll watch TV and sleep in the bed with the down feathers, or if I can't sleep, I'll make an excuse and lie on the floor.

This then could be our last afternoon. Why? Duty? Because I should? I wish for river banks, banana leaves and making love in the mud, but now we're here by a creek. She lies dozing on the Chinese blanket we brought back from one of our trips, the shadow from a willow tree throws a mask across her face with the smile that's there, even in sleep, like some inner mystery. Her shirt is still open from when I'd unbuttoned it earlier, down to the Mexican souvenir between her breasts.

"Chen Li's smile—it's put on," my wife, Paula says.

"If this is true, why does Chen Li look this way even when asleep?"—is the reply I want to give, but my lips remain taut.

Two years ago my boss sent me to China; I drank too much wine in a cool restaurant with a girl with a saucy smile. Since then Chen Li found work near my home. Something about the arch in her back, the length of her neck, the way she fell asleep during lovemaking made a part of her I could never reach.

"Sometimes I feel like you only accept me as a receptacle," I tell her.

"Oh?"

"Yes, something like that."

Paula fled on the one occasion she found herself marooned in a room with Chen Li at a party, gave a whimper and ran past the Newell posts wound with red velvet garlands, past the glittering tree with the white angel with the wand on top, through the door to the street where snow was beginning.

"That was a cruel thing to do," I said.

"Not as cruel as stealing my husband."

"That wasn't what she was doing."

"Well, what do you call it, some new spiritual chemistry?"

“Please, Paula, people are looking out their windows.”

Though, in fact “Oh, Little Town Of Bethlehem” rolled out over the tall windows into the snowy sidewalks.

“Put on your coat.”

“I can leave town, but I’m damned if I’ll take the children out of school before the end of the session.”

I squeezed her plump thigh; even through her winter tweeds, she looked so pale and tense. “She should take off a few pounds,” I thought.

“You’re hard on me, John,” she said.”

I hate deception, but that night I slept with her.

* * *

I think how to tell Chen Li.

“You mean—you mean you’re going back?” she says flatly.

“You mean do I want to? Well, I just think I should.”

I put on my shirt. I take out my keys. I take a few steps away. A wind sweeps through the willows. It strengthens me. Go. You must go. [512]

Reunion

Mark Hansen

I kid you not. She used to pay boys lollies to have sex down behind the toilet block. This was in year 4. In year 7, she told the class she wanted to be a stripper. Tonight was the 20th anniversary party of the end of high school, and I wondered what had become of Mandy.

At first, when Christine had phoned me back in June, I was keen to go. There was a voyeuristic desire to see how the others had turned out. As the date arrived, I had flashbacks of the sheer terror of that pubescent melting pot. I hated High School. There were bullies, hormones, peer pressure and exams to endure. I felt lost and confused, and so did my friends. The few I had kept in contact with over the years were survivors like me.

I hoped Mitch 'Killer' Kelly wouldn't turn up. He scared me. One time in class when Mr. Fraser was absent for a few minutes, he had yelled, "I hate Tom Bosconi!" and punched his fist threw the window.

I wanted to see little Ben Harrison again. Stories of his capers were legendary amongst us. Like when he climbed in the window of our music class, before Mrs. Winkler arrived to unlock the door, and knocked over a flower pot. Throughout the lesson, whenever Mrs. Winkler's back was turned, Greg would turn the pot around to show off it broken bits, and Ben would sneak out of his chair to turn it back again. We were in stitches by the end of what turned out to be the best music class all year.

When it came time to decide to go and see the faces of friends and foe, it was thoughts of Mandy that drove my curiosity. I'd had a slight crush on her, but she always treated me like a brother. In music class we often sat together, legs touching occasionally, while sharing a sight reading book. She played classical guitar really well, and could sing nicely too. What had she done over the last 20 years?

Arriving at the Gynea Golf Club, I walked into the function room and looked upon a potpourri of unfamiliar faces. This was a shock. Naively, I had expected to recognise most people by sight, assuming that they would be fatter, thinner, hairier, wrinklier, but essentially identifiable. Fortunately the organisers were wiser than me, and had arranged name tags. I stopped at the

front table to sign in and got my tag from a girl whose own read “Nena Tucker.” She recognised me, and started talking about Sarah and Jim, but I couldn’t remember her at all and moved on quickly into the throng, after a few polite exchanges.

To find Mandy was going to take quite a while. There were over a hundred people packed into the small room and I had to scan the tiny name tags to find out who they were. This meant getting quite close to each person, increasing the danger of falling into a conversation and being delayed from my goal. Twenty minutes later, I had talked briefly with ten old schoolies, but none had seen her. Luckily I ran into David who was a still a regular friend of mine.

“Have you seen Mandy anywhere?”

“Yeah, I was talking to her about 10 minutes ago. I think she went off with Alan for a chat,” he pointed to the left side of the stage.

As I headed in that direction, an announcement from the PA interrupted a multitude of verbal interrogations.

“Can I have everyone’s attention please? Everybody please can I have your attention for just a moment?” Most heads turned towards the stage and only whispered chattering remained.

“Can you all please find a table and take a seat for dinner. There will be ample time for catching up after dinner, as well as music from some members of the school rock band, and some dancing.”

As we herded each other toward the tables, I spotted David taking a seat and headed his way, lest I be trapped with a table of strangers. Taking a place next to him, I checked out the others already seated. I’d seen John a couple of months ago at my local Newsagent, but the others were unfamiliar, and as new conversations started I tried desperately to remember who they were.

“Mandy, over here, come and sit with us.” David’s voice made me look up.

“Oh, hi David, John, Anna, Gavin, Jacqui, Rachel and...” she looked at my name tag, “of course, Michael.” She took the vacant seat beside me, and I turned to face her.

“Hi, Mandy, how’ve ya been keeping?”

“I’m pretty good thanks Michael, and you?”

“Can’t complain. I’ve got a beautiful daughter, and have had some success with my music lately. Any kids?”

“No. Though I have been married once.”

“Been there, done that. I’m divorced too. So are you single now?”

“No, I’m happy enough living with someone right now. I don’t think I’ll ever get married again.”

“No me neither. What about your prodigious musical talents?”

“I’ve been in lots of bands, some of which have had music videos on TV.”

“So you didn’t become a stripper then?” Her laughter gave her away. Suddenly I saw the Mandy of old sitting before me.

“I do vaguely remember saying that. I mainly work in women’s refuges now and organise music events. Still play in some bands too. So who did you marry?”

“She was a girl three years below us at school, but you wouldn’t know her because she only joined the school after we’d left. We were married for 3 years, and our daughter is seven now.”

“My marriage lasted 2 years. He was a nice, decent man, and I loved him, but it just didn’t work out.”

“So who are you with now?”

“A fabulous person named Debbie.”

“Oh Cool.” I blurted out a bit too enthusiastically. An anxious pause was thankfully broken when a waiter handed us a menu to share. We huddled together to read it, and I relaxed as I felt Mandy’s leg touching mine. [1024]

Scent of Cologne

M. Stanley Bubien

It had been years—nine, ten, something like that—since he'd taken a drink, but having my dad over for Christmas still made me nervous. Some things are just ingrained, I guess, impossible to shake. Like tradition.

"Hi, Keith!" my dad barked with hand outstretched from my doorstep. I met the grip and waved him within. He complied and whisked off his jacket to place it upon the mantle. In that action, I caught a scent of his cologne, which he'd applied with such vigor, it reeked mostly of its base—alcohol, of course.

Clenching fingers into a fist, I sighed and inhaled deeply, a relaxation technique, but it failed me as I sucked another pungent mouthful of that reek.

"You got the gifts, right?" my father asked.

I shook my head—but I was clearing my sinuses, not answering the question. "Yep," I replied.

"You were right about sending them ahead—saved me big hassles at the airport."

Was that slur in his voice? It was hard to say. "I'm glad," I told him.

In the living room, he greeted my wife, Margaret, with his always exuberant, "Marge!" Followed by a sweeping motion that caught his grandson, Matt, unawares, carrying the ten-year-old's squeaking and giggling mass into a hearty embrace.

"What would you like to drink?" Margaret patted my father.

I blinked at her.

"Cranberry juice, if you've got it."

"For you, always!" Margaret stated, and retreated into the kitchen.

We ended up on the sofa to await the Christmas goose, making idle conversation, which, I must admit, I actually enjoyed. But then a cloud of some sort passed over my father.

"Keith," he said, cupping his glass with both hands. "I need to ask you a favor."

"Oh?"

"I know it's traditional for you to give the dinner toast—head of the household and all that—but I wanted to know if you'd let me this year."

“Um. Well. I’d prepared something.”

“I understand.” Dragging a fingertip across the crystal, he caused it to emit a high-pitched whine. “This is important, though.”

I stared at him. The last time he’d given a toast, he blathered on about family love or some-such, meanwhile swaying madly and dumping most of his Southern Comfort onto his plate.

“Consider it a gift?” he asked.

I inhaled with eyes closed. “Alright, I guess so.”

As if on cue, Margaret called me to carve the bird. There, however, I found myself taking my time, paring meticulously while wondering what my dad was going to do. But, typical when I concentrated on something, it went by quickly, and I soon found my family seated together at the table.

“Um, we’re sort of breaking tradition tonight,” I informed Marge. “Dad’s giving the toast.” I gestured. “Dad?”

“Thank you so much, Keith.” He erected himself to his feet, cranberry juice in hand. “I... I... Ahem!” he cleared his throat against his sleeve. “Sorry. I wanted to say something. Something about Christmas.” He looked down at his plate. “I remember one year—well, ‘remember’ may not be quite right—there was one year when I drank so much, I passed out while you were opening gifts, Keith.”

Memory for him might be hazy, but it was clear as day for me—“How can Daddy fall asleep with so many presents?” I had asked my mom.

“Or,” he continued. “Another year when I stepped on one of your toys and broke it. You were so young, and you cried for almost a half hour. And I...” he cleared his throat once more. “I was a little drunk, but your mom was afraid to let me hold you.”

“Christ, Dad!” I interrupted. “What’s your point? This is supposed to be a toast. What’re you doing?”

Looking me in the eye—something he rarely did—he said, “you know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“Of course, but I don’t see why?”

“Marge,” he turned to my wife. “There was also that Christmas... Matthew’s first...” his voice cracked, but he tried to continue, “when... when...”

“When,” Margaret finished for him, “I had to ask you to leave.”

He nodded and swallowed, which made his adam’s apple bob with the strain. All of us, even Matt, remained silent. I gripped the edge of the table,

staring at my father, trying to catch something, some reason or purpose for bringing this stuff up again, stuff I'd been trying to forget for, well, a lifetime, really.

He was gazing downward and rubbing his brow, apparently trying to regain his composure.

“Dad...?” I whispered.

He raised a palm, and looking up, he said, “okay, that was bad. I didn't like saying it, I swear, but I needed to set some context.”

“For what?”

“For a question.” He raised his glass into the air, holding it in a traditional toast position. “Keith, Marge, Matthew”—he made eye contact with each of us—“for these things that I've done so terribly, terribly, wrong. For the hurt and pain I've caused you all.” He hefted the crystal forward. “For all this, I am truly sorry. And I ask—no, I beg—please, forgive me.”

Marge and I glanced at each other. Her mouth was pulled tight, and I could tell her teeth were clenched, her usual tense look. I frowned as if to ask, “what do you want me to say?” followed with a shrug. Her jaw simply flexed.

Drawing in a long, haggard breath, I blew it out across the table as the shadow of my father standing over us begged a response.

Filling my lungs again, I took hold of my glass. “Dad, I'm not sure what to say. Um, yeah, those things hurt. But, um...” Blinking at Marge, I rose and lifted my cup, “I accept your apology.”

Without standing, Margaret presented her goblet. “Me too.”

“Me three!” Matt cried. And tension fled with our laughter.

And once we had retaken our seats, and filled our plates with goose, and begun a hearty meal, I had a moment to wonder—or hope, honestly—that maybe we hadn't broken only one tradition tonight, but quite possibly two. [1024]