

FICTION

FIVE SHORT STORIES

BY LYDIA DAVIS

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A STORY OF STOLEN SALAMIS

My son's Italian landlord in Brooklyn kept a shed out back in which he cured and smoked salamis. One night, in the midst of a wave of petty vandalism and theft, the shed was broken into and the salamis were taken. My son talked to his landlord about it the next day, commiserating over the vanished sausages. The landlord was resigned and philosophical, but corrected him: 'They were not sausages. They were salamis.' Then the incident was written up in one of the city's more prominent magazines as an amusing and colourful urban incident. In the article, the reporter called the stolen goods 'sausages'. My son showed the article to his landlord, who hadn't seen it. The landlord was interested and pleased that the magazine had seen fit to report the incident, but he added: 'They weren't sausages. They were salamis.'

A STORY TOLD TO ME BY A FRIEND

A friend of mine told me a sad story the other day about a neighbour of hers. He had begun a correspondence with a stranger through an online dating service. The friend lived hundreds of miles away, in North Carolina. The two men exchanged messages and then photos and were soon having long conversations, at first in writing and then by phone. They found that they had many interests in common, were emotionally and intellectually compatible, were comfortable with each other and were physically attracted to each other, as far as they could tell on the Internet. Their professional interests, too, were close, my friend's neighbour being an accountant and his new friend down South an assistant professor of economics at a small college. After some months, they seemed to be well and truly in love, and my friend's neighbour was convinced that 'this was it', as he put it. When some vacation time came up, he arranged to fly down south for a few days and meet his Internet love.

During the day of travel, he called his friend two or three times and they talked. Then he was surprised to receive no answer. Nor was his friend at the airport to meet him. After waiting there and calling several more times, my friend's neighbour left the airport and went to the address his friend had given him. No one answered when he knocked and rang. Every possibility went through his mind.

Here, some parts of the story are missing, but my friend told me that what her neighbour learned was that, on that very day, even as he was on his way south, his Internet friend had died of a heart attack while on the phone with his doctor; my friend's neighbour, having learned this either from the man's neighbour or from the police, had made his way to the local morgue; he had been allowed to view his Internet friend; and so it was here, face to face with a dead man, that he first laid eyes on the one who, he had been convinced, was to have been his companion for life.

NOTES DURING LONG PHONE CONVERSATION WITH MOTHER

for summer – she needs

pretty dress – cotton

cotton nottoc

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ON THE TRAIN

We are united, he and I, though strangers, against the two women in front of us talking so steadily and audibly across the aisle to each other. Bad manners.

Later in the journey I look over at him (across the aisle) and he is picking his nose. As for me, I am dripping tomato from my sandwich on to my newspaper. Bad habits.

I would not report this if I were the one picking my nose.

I look again and he is still at it.

As for the women, they are now sitting together side by side and quietly reading, clean and tidy, one a magazine, one a book. Blameless.

SUSIE BROWN WILL BE IN TOWN

Susie Brown will be in town. She will be in town to sell her things. Susie Brown is moving far away. She would like to sell her queen mattress. Do we want her queen mattress? Do we want her ottoman? Do we want her bath items?

It is time to say goodbye to Susie Brown. We have enjoyed her friendship.

We have enjoyed her tennis lessons.

IN A HOUSE BESIEGED by Lydia Davis

Which of the drafts below is the first draft? Which is the final version? Why?

In a house besieged lived a man and a woman, with two dogs and two cats. There were mice there, too, but they were not acknowledged. From where they cowered in the kitchen, the man and the woman heard small explosions. “The wind,” said the woman. “Hunters,” said the man. “Smoke,” said the woman. “The army,” said the man. The woman wanted to go home, but she was already at home, there in the middle of the country in a house besieged, in a house that belonged to someone else.

In a house besieged lived a man and a woman. From where they cowered in the kitchen, the man and the woman heard small explosions. “The wind,” said the woman. “Hunters,” said the man. “The rain,” said the woman. “The army,” said the man. The woman wanted to go home, but she was already home, there in the middle of the country in a house besieged.

The Man at the River

Dave Eggers

from *Granta*

There is an American sitting by a narrow caramel-coloured river in South Sudan. His Sudanese friend, ten years his junior, has brought him to the area, and they have been touring around on bicycles, riding on dirt trails. This day, his Sudanese friend wanted to show the American man a town on the other side of the river, and so they rode a few miles to the riverbank, to this spot, where the river was shallow and slow-moving, and the Sudanese friend waded across.

But the American man decided he couldn't wade across the river. He had cut his shin a few days before, and the cut was unbandaged and deep enough that he is concerned that something in the river, some parasite or exotic microbe, will get into his body via this wound, and, because they are hours away from any Western medical care, he might get sick and die here. So he's chosen not to wade across the river. He's chosen to sit on the rocks of the riverbed, and wait.

The heat is extreme, and he and his Sudanese friend have been biking for hours, on and off, so the American is happy to have some time alone. But soon the American is not alone. There is a tall man wading across the river toward him, a friend of his Sudanese friend. The American fears what news this second friend could be bringing, why his friend hadn't come himself.

'Hello!' the second friend says.

The American says hello.

'Our mutual friend has sent me. He would like you to visit the village over the river. He has sent me to bring you across.'

The American tells him that he's OK, that he's fine, that he would like to stay where he is. He is embarrassed to admit that he doesn't want to wade through the water, which is knee-deep, with his small wound, so he says he's tired and would like to stay.

The second friend stands above him, flummoxed. 'Please will you come across the river with me?' he asks. 'I was given this task.'

The American explains that he's very tired and that he and their mutual friend agreed that he would stay here, on the riverbed, and that this is OK, that the second friend needn't worry.

The second friend's face is twisted, pained. 'Well, you see, in our culture,' he says, and the American winces, for these words usually precede an unpleasant request, 'we must help our guests. It's my duty to help you get to the other side.'

The American again insists that he doesn't want to or need to go across the river. As a last resort, the American shows him his wound and tries to explain the possibility that it might become infected.

'But this river is clean,' the second friend says.

'I'm sure it is,' the American says, hating himself for seeming fragile, 'but I read about the many infections we can get here, given the different microbes . . .' The second friend is looking doubtful. 'Just like if you came to the US,' the American continues. 'You would be subject to diseases that were unfamiliar to you. You could get far sicker, far quicker, than we could in our own land . . .'

The second friend shakes off all this talk. 'But in our culture,' he says again, and the American wants to yell: *This has nothing to do with your culture. You know this and I know this.* 'In our culture it is not permitted to allow a guest to sit here like this.'

The second friend continues to look pained, and the American begins to realize that the friend will be in trouble – with their mutual friend, and the mutual friend's family, and with everyone else in the town – if the second friend does not accomplish this one task of getting the American across the river. Now the second friend is looking into the distance, his hands on his hips. He squints at a fisherman who is sitting in a small dugout canoe in the bend of the river and an idea occurs to him. He goes running to the fisherman. And soon he is back with the fisherman in tow. 'This man will take you across.'

To the American, the notion of this fisherman interrupting what he's doing to ferry him across a shallow river is worse, in so many ways, than the thought of contracting some waterborne infection. He tries to refuse again but he knows now that he's losing. He's lost.

'I don't want this,' he says.

'Please. This man will take you. You will not get wet.'

The American is smiling grimly, apologetically, at the fisherman, who is not happy to have been asked to do this. *No one wants this*, the American wants to say to the second friend, *no one but you*. But now, because the fisherman is waiting, and the second friend has gone to such trouble, it seems the path of least resistance is to get into the canoe and go across the river. So the American gets in, and notices that in the canoe are six inches of water, so he doesn't sit, but only squats among a few nets and no fish.

The fisherman has nowhere to sit, so he stands in the water, and begins to pull the canoe across the river in long, laboured strides. The second friend is walking next to the fisherman and the two of them argue loudly in Dinka about what's happening. The fisherman is clearly annoyed that this American needs to be ferried across the river like some kind of despot and the second friend is likely saying *I know, I know, Lord knows I know*. And the two of them are forming, or confirming, an idea of this American and all Westerners: that they will not walk across a shallow river, that they insist on commandeering canoes from busy fishermen and being pulled across while they squat inside. That they are afraid to get wet.

But the American did not want to go across the river at all. He did not ask for this. He did not ask for any of this. All he wants is to be a man sitting on a riverbed. He doesn't want to be a guest, or a white man, or a stranger or a strange man, or someone who needs to cross the river to see anything at all.