

SAMUEL JOHNSON IS
INDIGNANT

LYDIA DAVIS

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STORIES



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Boring Friends

We know only four boring people. The rest of our friends we find very interesting. However, most of the friends we find interesting find us boring: the most interesting find us the most boring. The few who are somewhere in the middle, with whom there is reciprocal interest, we distrust: at any moment we feel, they may become too interesting for us, or we too interesting for them.

A Mown Lawn

She hated a *mown lawn*. Maybe that was because *mow* was the reverse of *wom*, the beginning of the name of what she was—a *woman*. A *mown lawn* had a sad sound to it, like a *long moan*. From her, a *mown lawn* made a *long moan*. *Lawn* had some of the letters of *man*, though the reverse of *man* would be *Nam*, a bad war. A *raw war*. *Lawn* also contained the letters of *law*. In fact, *lawn* was a contraction of *lawman*. Certainly a *lawman* could and did *mow* a *lawn*. *Law and order* could be seen as starting from *lawn order*, valued by so many Americans. *More lawn* could be made using a *lawn mower*. A *lawn mower* did make *more lawn*. *More lawn* was a contraction of *more lawmen*. Did *more lawn* in America make *more lawmen* in America? Did *more lawn* make *more Nam*? *More mown lawn* made *more long moan*, from her. Or a *lawn mourn*. So often, she said, Americans wanted *more mown lawn*. All of America might be one *long mown lawn*. A *lawn* not *mown* grows *long*, she said: better a *long lawn*. Better a *long lawn* and a *mole*. Let the *lawman* have the *mown lawn*, she said. Or the *moron*, the *lawn moron*.

City People

They have moved to the country. The country is nice enough: there are quail sitting in the bushes and frogs peeping in the swamps. But they are uneasy. They quarrel more often. They cry, or she cries and he bows his head. He is pale all the time now. She wakes in a panic at night, hearing him snuffle. She wakes in a panic again, hearing a car go up the driveway. In the morning there is sunlight on their faces but mice are chattering in the walls. He hates the mice. The pump breaks. They replace the pump. They poison the mice. Their neighbor's dog barks. It barks and barks. She could poison the dog.

“We're city people,” he says, “and there aren't any nice cities to live in.”

Betrayal

In her fantasies about other men, as she grew older, about men other than her husband, she no longer dreamed of sexual intimacy, as she once had, perhaps for revenge, when she was angry, perhaps out of loneliness, when he was angry, but only of an affection and a profound sort of understanding, a holding of hands and a gazing into eyes, often in a public place like a café. She did not know if this change came out of respect for her husband, for she did truly respect him, or out of plain weariness, at the end of the day, or out of a sense of what activity she could expect from herself, even in a fantasy, now that she was a certain age. And when she was particularly tired, she couldn't even manage the affection and the profound understanding, but only the mildest sort of companionship, such as being in the same room alone together, sitting in chairs. And it happened that as she grew older still, and more tired, and then still older, and still more tired, another change occurred and she found that even the mildest sort of companionship, alone together, was now too vigorous to sustain, and her fantasies were limited to a calm sort of friendliness among other friends, the sort she really could have had with any man, with a clear conscience, and did in fact have with many, who were friends of her husband's too, or not, a friendliness that gave her comfort and strength, at night, when the friendships in her waking life were not enough, or had not been enough by the end of the day. And so these fantasies came to be indistinguishable from the reality of her waking life, and should not have been any sort of betrayal at all. Yet because they were fantasies she had alone, at night, they continued to feel like some sort of betrayal, and perhaps, because approached in this spirit of betrayal, as perhaps they had to be, to be any comfort and strength, continued to be, in fact, a sort of betrayal.

The White Tribe

We live near a tribe of bloodless white people. Day and night they come to steal things from us. We have put up tall wire fences but they spring over them like gazelles and grin fiendishly up at us when we stand looking out of our windows. They rub the tops of their heads until their thin flaxen hair stands up in tufts, and they strut back and forth over our gravel terrace. While we are watching this performance, others among them have crept into our garden and are furtively taking our roses, stuffing them into bags which hang from their naked shoulders. They are pitifully thin, and as we watch them we become ashamed of our fence. Yet when they go, slipping away like white shadows in the gloom, we grow angry at the devastation they have left among our Heidelbergs and Lady Belpers, and resolve to take more extreme measures against them. It is not always the roses they come for, but sometimes—though the countryside for miles is covered with boulders and shards of stone—they carry away the very rocks from our woods, and walking out in the morning we find the ground pitted with hollows where pale bugs squirm blindly down into the earth.

Our Trip

My mother asks on the phone how our drive home was, and I say “Fine,” which is not the truth but a fiction. You can’t tell everyone the truth all the time, and you certainly can’t tell anyone the whole truth, ever, because it would take too long.

The word “fine” is the greatest abbreviation and obviously wrong. Even a long drive with two people can be difficult, and with three it can be much worse. We almost always start a trip with some cross words anyway, because I can’t seem to leave on time and Mac can’t stand leaving a minute late and then there’s Junior. Mac generally cheers up once we’re on our way, but this time he went on snapping at me because I didn’t tell him where to turn far enough ahead of time or I gave him too many instructions at once. On top of that I kept telling him to shift up. The car is old and the transmission is noisy, so it’s hard for me to tell if Mac’s in the right gear.

Then we began to smell burning oil. There was another van in front of us, packed full of some religious group, so we knew it could be them, and when we came to a garage they pulled in and that was the end of the burning smell, so Mac’s mood improved a little.

But we were still in mountain country, and Junior started saying which mountains he was planning to climb next year—I’m going to climb that one, he said, pointing, and that one, what’s the name of that one? Whiteface? I’m going to climb Whiteface, and then that one. I’m going to climb that one over there, what’s the name of that one? Charles? What about that one over there? What’s the name? Mungus? Fungus? Mangoes? Mongoose? Hey, look at that one—that’s gotta be the biggest one. What’s the name of that one?

I was turning the map this way and that, trying to figure out what the names of these mountains were, and even though Junior was talking so fast, and acting more like six years old than nine, I didn’t see any big harm in this conversation. But Mac said he felt as if he was on a tour bus and would we be quiet. Anything a little out of control makes him nervous.

Eventually we got onto the highway and then of course I had to go to the bathroom. I always have to go to the bathroom when we get onto a major highway. Luckily we came to a rest stop pretty soon, and since we were there anyway we sat down at a picnic table to eat our sandwiches. The picnic table wasn’t all that clean—it had a few sticky spills and some bird lime on it—but the sun was warm and was just beginning to relax and enjoy watching the people walk past us to the restrooms when Junior came back from the restrooms and asked me for money for a soda. He always asks for a soda if he sees a soda machine, and I usually say No, which is what I said this time.

Now he decided to make an issue of it, and said he wouldn’t get back in the car if we didn’t get him a soda, and he went off over the grass toward the Dog Walk Area and sat down to sulk on some kind of large bent pipe sticking up out of the grass. So then Mac, who is more likely to give in than I am, said to let him have his soda, and I called Junior back and gave him the money and he went off and came back with the soda. I made the mistake of reading the ingredients, though, and when I saw how much caffeine there was in it, I began going on about that and I wouldn’t stop, even back in the car, until I saw that now Junior was getting upset again and the whole thing was pointless. So I shut up and started cleaning my hands with some pre-moistened towelettes called Wet Ones which have a sickly sweet smell to them, and the smell filled the car so badly that now the two of them turned on me.

After that, Junior was pretty cheerful because the soda made him feel a few years older, I could see it by the way he slouched with his knees apart and his hands dangling, and the atmosphere in the

car improved even more when a crowd of men and women on motorcycles passed us going about 90 miles per hour. Mac said he hoped they would get stopped for speeding, and the thought of that cheered him up so much he started a conversation with me. He asked me what kind of car we should get when we bought a new car. He pointed out a Dodge Caravan, and Junior woke up from his daydream and said he wanted a Corvette. Mac asked where he was going to get the \$30,000. Junior didn't have an answer, then he thought to ask how much Mac had paid for our Voyager. \$7,000, Mac said, which stumped Junior but didn't seem fair to me, because he didn't tell Junior he had gotten it second-hand, so I threw in that information just to make it fair, and of course Junior said he would get his Corvette second-hand too. Cars aren't my favorite subject, though, so pretty soon we had run it into the ground and I went back to doing what I had been doing, which was looking out the window.

We passed a spot where the Highway Department had cleared the forest by the side of the road and planted some trees. The trees were covered with shriveled reddish foliage and obviously dying. This started me thinking about deforestation, and then about the disappearance of family farms, which somehow took me back to caffeine levels again. At that point, I started trying to identify the new tree I had learned on our vacation, and when I gave up on that I just watched the fat on my arm ripple in the wind from the open window.

Things went on pretty much like that. At some point I began to think I had spider bites on my legs; later Mac asked me if I had put something strange in the sandwiches; Junior rolled up the toll ticket to make a telescope, and Mac yelled at him; but then we all quieted down to watch the remains of a pretty dramatic accident by the side of the road.

At the rest stop I had been thinking that about 50 percent of the people I saw looked as though they'd had a better vacation than we had. But then 50 percent of them looked as though they'd had a worse one, so I felt alright about it.

When we were twenty minutes from home, Junior wanted to stop at a Holiday Inn and spend the night and couldn't understand why we said no. But I realized about then that as a family we have a certain kind of loyalty to each other, and the way it works is that no two of us will get mad at the third one at the same time, except occasionally, as in the case of the Wet Ones.

Special Chair

He and I are both teachers in the university system and we will be teachers until we are too old to teach, and we would certainly like to be given a special chair at our universities, but what we have gotten so far is the wrong kind of special chair, a special chair belonging to a friend, a chair that swivels and has splayed feet and is special to her for reasons we can't remember. We who teach in the university system would like a special chair so that we would be paid more and not have to teach as much and not have to sit on so many committees—we would sit instead on our special chair. But we have not been given any special chairs by our universities, only this strange heavy chair belonging to our friend, who moved away many years ago and had to leave it behind, and who does not want to give it up for reasons we have forgotten or never knew. All this time we have been employed by our universities only to teach from year to year without even the security of tenure. But now one of us has had some good luck and has been given a job with tenure, though not by his own university, and in leaving his present job, the job without tenure, he must also leave behind the chair special to our friend, because he is moving far away and there will not be room for it where he is going. Even though there is a great deal of large empty space in the state where he is going, more empty space than practically any other state but Wyoming, he will be living there in a very small house, too small for an extra chair, especially such a heavy one made out of a wine barrel. And so I will be the one to keep our friend's chair for her now; it has passed from him to me, though not without effort, since it is so heavy. And perhaps, I am thinking, her special chair with its strange red vinyl upholstery, with its bunghole in the back, and its genuine cork, will now bring me good luck of a professional kind too.

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