Salami for Sunday

Lawrence Sturhahn

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Recommended Citation
Sturhahn, Lawrence. 'Salami for Sunday.' New Mexico Quarterly 30, 2 (1960). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol30/iss2/14
people have got it made," Corporal Tate said after they had finished GI-ing the barracks on Saturday night and there was enough time to see the last half of the picture at Theatre No. 4. Outside the PX two paratroopers, waiting for shipment to Germany, dressed in their tight, tailored ODs, their trousers tucked into their gleaming jump boots, stopped them and told them to take their pants out of their boots. One grabbed Savastein by the front of his ill-fitted, bulky Eisenhower jacket and asked him whether he wanted to make something out of it, recruits wearing their trousers bloused. So the three of them had gone into the movie with their pants flapping over the tops of their new, stiff, unshined, russet combat boots.

"Yes-oh! You have got it made," the Corporal had said. "Tomorrow is Sunday and you can stay in the sack until 0700 hours. I am feeling big tonight so go out and have a big time, but this place looks like a pig-house still, not fit fo' sojers to live in."

"Man," Roosevelt Wilson had said when the Corporal had gone, "he is one nasty man."

"You want to come with us?"

"No," Wilson said, "thank you, no. I figure I'll just lay up here on my bunk and enjoy not working."

"Can I do anything for you?" Savastein asked guiltily. "C'mon with us."

"Man, I don't feel like it."

At 2 P.M. on Sunday afternoon he was waiting in the doorway to the service club. A bitter, grey wind swept between the yellow buildings and there was a rim of ice on puddles of water in the street. A car turned at the corner and came slowly down the street, bouncing over the ruts, faces pressed against the mud-covered windshield and side windows. In front of the service club the car stopped and a girl, a woman, and two children got out, came up the
concrete path, holding their coats against the icy wind whipping at them, and carrying a package, wrapped in greasy delicatessen paper. The car drove around the corner to park in the lot behind the big, yellow building which had a sign on the front: WELCOME TO CAMP KILMER.

Savastein stood in the doorway, sheltered from the wind, stamping his feet, and when he saw the black Plymouth with the New York license plate make the same cautious turn he ran out, down towards the street, waving his arms. When the car stopped he jerked open the door and then his wife had her arms around him, hugging him, her lips searching over his face and he whimpered softly, the cold and loneliness for the moment gone.

Finally calm, he held her away, seeing the tears in her eyes, and the way her black hair fell across her forehead and he asked gently, "Where's Poppa and Momma, they didn't want to come?"

"They said that we would be better off alone." She was crying openly and with his two hands he folded the collar of her black, thick wool coat down away from her face.

"It's all right now," he whispered. "But we have to take the car around in back because you can't park here."

"Do we have to stay here at all?" She looked around and shivered. "Couldn't we just drive some place where it's warm. Suppose I just kidnapped you, what could they do?"

"Oh," he said, "they could do quite a lot. Besides I am not sure there is any place warm left in the world." He thought of the squad room in his barracks where fifty men slept on double-decker bunks, one above the other and side by side, one man's head and another man's feet, alternately. There were six toilets in the latrine and for the five days they had been there three of them had been stopped up. But if the barracks was so cold with a rim of frost in the corners of the windows inside day and night, then inside of the service club it was colder.

The families of the inductees sat around on leatherette covered, aluminum chairs with their coats on, mothers and wives holding tightly to the hands of their soldier sons and husbands with blue, cold fingers. They talked intently, looking into their faces, afraid to be silent. They had unwrapped the papers and opened the boxes which they had carried in and the food was scattered around them, on the floor by the chairs, or on the scarred, formica-topped tables in front of the couches. There were half sandwiches and wet
dill pickles cut longways into slices and open jars of jam and gefüllte fish, and salamis chopped into hunks, but nobody was eating. The younger children ran around the enormous room with their coats and hats and gloves on, shouting to each other. Three boys crouched behind the door, pointing imaginary rifles into the room and yelling, "Bang! Bang! Bang! You're dead, you gook!"

Savastein and his wife came in the back. He held the door for her but when she saw the bare room with all the people crowded into it she stopped, putting her hand to her mouth. "Oh," she gasped.

"It's pretty awful, isn't it?" He looked around for it was the first time he had been in the building himself. "But it's just a temporary place. Nobody stays at this post so they don't make it very nice."

"But it's so cold," she said. "It's so awful and cold."

"I won't be here long," he said, "Sylvie, don't worry, for Christ's sake."

She looked at him. "Have you got the orders yet?"

"No," he lied, "not yet. They still say it will be Monday." They had posted the orders on the bulletin board between the orderly room and the first barracks on Friday night just after he had come back from the phone center where it had taken him two hours to call New York thirty-five miles away. There had been at least fifteen men in line for each operator and after he had placed it he had to sit and wait for the loudspeaker—afraid he would not hear his own name in the noise—to announce his call. When he had finally gotten through he heard her father's voice.

"Poppa! Is Sylvia there?"

"Is that you?" his father-in-law asked.

"For God's sake, who else, the-stop-the-music-man?"

"Why didn't you call? Momma and Sylvia have worried. Are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Poppa. I didn't call because the—because it's the first god-damned time I have been able to get out of the barracks, is why. Is she there?"

"Do they treat you all right?"

"It is a hotel here. I never had it so good. For God's sake!"

"So, all right, all right," he said. "Do you have to take the Lord's name in vain with every other word?"

"I'm sorry, Poppa," he said and then he heard her voice.
“Darling, why didn’t you call? It’s been five days and I just got the postcard. Could you have called?”

“Honey, I’m sorry but I couldn’t get out of the company. We have—you have to understand until I can tell you about it. I’ll explain it all when I see you. Are you coming down on Sunday?” There was a mechanical clicking in the line and the operator’s voice broke in. “Your the-ree minutes are up—pu-lease signal when through.”

“Operator, I’ll signal—are you still there? Are you coming down?”

“You should have called collect,” she said. “Yes, we’re all coming on Sunday at two. Do you know where you’re going? Have you got the orders yet?”

“Not yet,” he said. “Rumor has it that it will be tomorrow, orders Saturday and shipping Monday. Most everybody from here has been going to Dix, to the Infantry.”

“The Infantry?” she asked.

He had just come back from speaking to her when the inductee came running into the barracks, yelling, “The orders! The orders are up!” They had been posted, one sheet on top of the other, in the cold darkness and the whole company crowded around the bulletin board, each pushing to get close enough to find his own name, one of four hundred. The freezing wind blew through the area, swirling loose, dry dirt in it, rattling the sheets of paper; a loose door on the mop shack in back of the first barracks slammed back and forth. The inductees held cigarette lighters and matches against the wind, trying to read the names. Savastein saw his own over the shoulders of another man who kept saying, “Goddam it, let me see. Let me see... There, Fort Dix, the Infantry—sixteen weeks of basic and then Korea, that’s to die.”

“Heh, Heinmann, you going to Dix? Heh... mail, that’s where I’m going too.”

Savastein was down for the Signal Corps, Camp Gordon, Georgia.

In the service club on Sunday Sylvia looked at him and said, “Oh, I hope it’s Fort Dix. That’s so close I could come and see you every weekend.”

“Sylvie,” he explained, “that’s the Infantry. Those guys are in Korea on the line inside twenty weeks. They call it the happy peninsula. Korea, that’s the war.”

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“Oh, I don’t want you to get shot at.”
“I don’t want to be shot at,” he said smiling. “So maybe it’s better that I go someplace else. Maybe, like Camp Gordon in Georgia.”
“That’s not infantry?”
“That’s Signal Corps. That’s for people with brains like me.”
“But Georgia,” she said. “I could never come and see you all the way to Georgia. Oh, Jesus, why does it have to be so awful?” She bowed her head.
“Let’s not talk about it now,” he said. “When the orders are up I’ll call you. And if I can’t call you before I leave I’ll call you when I arrive. It will be a surprise.” She looked at him and smiled sadly.
“Oh, darling,” she said.
“We have to sit down,” he said stiffly. He took her hand and led her across the room where they could sit on half a couch, next to a woman with a fur jacket and an inductee who was sitting, looking at a piece of cake. Blessed are the rich, Savastein thought, for they shall inherit the earth. But there’s only one army.
“Are there many Negroes here?” she asked, looking around and seeing the family opposite them.
“There are all kinds, black, white, striped, what did you think?”
“I just asked.”
“It’s the same for all of us—lousy.”

On Friday night when Wilson came back from seeing the orders he was silent, climbing up in the bunk above Savastein, lying there.
“Well?” Savastein asked.
“I reckon I’ll just stay here. I have become attached here with strings that are gold and fine, man.”
“Cut it out.”
“I reckon old Corporal Tate has fixed me just right. He fix it so I spend my two years right here. I am gonna be fireman and keep the water hot and the barracks warm for my brothers who is moving out to fight.”
“Jesus Christ, Roosevelt. They can’t even keep you in the damn army. It’s bad enough the draft board sent you because they have to fill a quota. Now they have to discharge you.”
“I mention that to the Corporal,” Wilson said, “and he allowed as how that’s not quite the way it is. He say it to me at the top of his voice which is
considerable. He say, *nigger*, you will be assigned to my company and you and me is gonna have a great old time together."

“But he can’t do that.”

“He can’t do it,” Wilson agreed.

“I’ll go to the captain,” Savastein said angrily.

“The captain done signed the orders.”

“But it’s not right. It’s against the law.”

“You say it’s against the law but Corporal Tate, he is the law. Man, I hate him. If I was to get drunk I might take out my hate on the white man on him specific.”

“Roosevelt, you can’t really read or write?” Savastein asked, and Wilson rolled over on his side and looked at him. “I’ll go to the captain. I swear to hell I will.”

“You won’t do nothing, Savastein,” he said quietly. “You understand one thing about this army, man—I come on knowing all about it—there ain’t no right or wrong. A man does not go contrary to the law because it’s been this way since long ago. It don’t matter to you whether I can read or write because you not going against them now.”

Savastein looked out the black window. He ran his finger down the glass, feeling the grit of dirt under it, and the cold outside. He thought of two years on this barren post, with Tate and his combat infantry badge, his combat infantry talk, his combat infantry swagger stick, telling each new group of soldiers, scared and sick with cold in winter and heat in summer, *You people got it made ’cause I’m feeling big today*. Already Savastein knew enough to know that he would do nothing, right now there was only himself.

“At least you won’t have to go to Korea,” he said finally.

“Man, that’s why I like a white man,” Wilson said. “You always looking on the brighter side. You right, you absolutely right.” And then his face changed, hardened, became cruel. “Unless by chance he push me and I have to kill him.”

“Do you want me to write you another letter?” Savastein had asked.

“No, man, let me be,” he had answered.

“Honey,” Sylvia said, “it’s four o’clock.”

“There’s one sleeps in the bunk above me,” he said.

“One what?”
"A Negro."

"Oh," she said. "What time do you have to go back?"

"At five," he said, slowly, looking at his watch. "There's a formation at five and then we go to chow."

"You have to?"

"I have to."

"Is it good food?"

"It's awful. It's terrible, rotten food." Then he laughed. "But you know, the second night I was here I was on KP. Like in all the movies soldiers are on KP, peeling potatoes. Only now it is done in a machine: you just trim them, take out the eyes after the machine is done. All night we sat there, and everybody is talking, telling about their wives and girls and where they come from, and what they're gonna do after the war is over. You know it was all night but I don't remember it was bad, all of us together."

"All night," she said, horrified. "But the food is edible, I mean, you won't get sick."

"For Christ's sake, I'm a big boy. I'm sorry, Sylvie," he said, seeing her face. "I'm sorry." He realized then, or thought and knew it finally now, that she would not understand and he should not tell her because she would just worry. He felt protective of her, but very lonely because there was nobody to whom he could tell it. There was nobody who would understand. He looked at her, seeing her dark blue eyes, the way her face was square and the precise line of her lipstick on her beautiful mouth. She looked like she would understand the whole world and she understood nothing and it made them separate for the first time. Impulsively wanting to touch her, he reached out to take her hand.

"You seem changed," she said softly. "I don't know. Can I go by and see where you live before I go?"

"No," he said. "I don't want everybody seeing you, you're so pretty it would just upset them." He smiled but she did not return it. "I have to go back," he said finally. There was nothing he had to say to her; they were from separate worlds and civilians did not understand. He felt rushed now to go back to the company. He looked at his watch again.

"Now?"

"Yes."

"But it's early."
“It’s almost four-thirty and it’s a fifteen minute walk.”
“I can’t even kiss you here.”
“In the car,” he said. He stood up and walked with her, past the families who were still sitting, past others who were getting up and beginning to fold the food away into the paper and boxes before they went. Outside the wind cut at them. They half ran down to the car and he opened the door for her, then ran around and got in himself.

“Don’t worry about me, Sylvie,” he said. “It isn’t bad here, and look I am losing weight. Won’t it be nice for you when I am thin again. You won’t be able to bug me anymore.”

“Don’t change,” she said. “You can’t because you’re honest and kind and they can’t hurt you no matter what they do. You won’t change, will you?”
“No,” he said. “I am honest and unafraid.”

“Why are you laughing?” she asked angrily. “Is it funny?”

“Oh, Sylvie, you wouldn’t understand, we are three-thousand miles from the Grand Concourse and 174th Street.”

“I would try to understand,” she said, sadly.

“I can’t explain it now. There’s no time. I will write you a long letter and tell you then.” He wanted to look at his watch again and he wanted her to go. It was terrible, but he wanted her to go because he wanted to go back to the company. “I promise I will,” he said.

“Look, I forgot,” she said and she handed him a package. He felt it with his fingers. “It’s food, do you want some of it now? We could have taken it inside and had it together with all those other people.”

“Not now.”

“We could have had it together,” she said sadly. He saw in her face that she was going to cry and he didn’t want her to because he didn’t want to see it.

“But you can have it later tonight, by yourself.”

He opened the door, holding the package in his hand, feeling through the paper, the hard shapes of little jars, the rounded, pulled together end of a salami, and wrapped pieces of rye bread which he knew she had buttered.

“Kiss me,” she said and he leaned forward across the wide front seat and kissed her.

“Don’t let them hurt you. If they say for you to do something then you do it, Poppa said, and don’t volunteer.”

“I won’t,” he said.

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“And you’ll write and tell me about it?”
“I’ll call you as soon as I know anything.”
“I love you,” she said quickly, looking away, starting the car and jerking it into gear. He slammed the door and she backed out, turned the car away from him. He watched as she drove out, and just before she turned the corner around the building, he waved goodby. She was gone and he stood in the freezing dusk, seeing that the light was already dropping, feeling the night wind blowing at him.

Savastin started back to the company, carrying the package like an offering to his buddies. He had to pack tonight because he was shipping in the morning at 0500 hours. He would share what she had brought him with the others; right now, alone, he wasn’t hungry at all.

Sunny Island

by Rafael Heliodoro Valle

In Capri,
island of sun.
Near, far, in all things
lies love.
The bluest sea
and in the voice
a thin
trembling.
In these belvederes
Virgil dreamed.
Dream Capri
of yesterday and today.

—translated by D. M. Pettinella