

THE GOATS

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I hated our goats. I know I should not have, but I did. They were bigger than me and much stronger. I was six but small for my age, and my mother used to say that I would probably never be tall. She said it was due to the war. "Not enough vitamins." Ever since, vitamins have been a magical substance to me. You eat one and you grow an inch. You don't and you remain stunted like me.

Because of the goats my brother and I missed Mass every morning. Not that I cared about that, although my brother did. He said he had missed getting a star for the last three years because of the goats. But I didn't care about stars. I much preferred the windmills and tulips that our teacher stamped on good work.

I didn't like the goats because I couldn't control them. We had three of them. One with horns and two without. I was in charge of Maureen and Maggie, the ones without horns. My brother always took Eileen because he was stronger. Eileen hated me as much as I feared her. She had it in for me. No sooner had I turned my back on her than pow! she had me down. In the resulting confusion I would let go of the ropes and Maureen and Maggie would take off. Luckily the ropes would usually get caught in a bush or a tree and I would be able to retrieve them. Once we arrived at the field where the goats grazed, we would dig out the steel pins left there from the day before, find a rock, hammer the pins back into the ground and tether the goats for the day. After school we had to make the journey again, but then it was different. It didn't matter how long we took to get them home as long as they were there by supper time.

The goats were my father's pets. After supper he would milk them, give some of the milk to the cat and some to the pig, who slobbered it up in no-time, and the rest he would place in the kitchen sink to cool. None of us liked goats' milk, but my brother said that it was better than nothing.

One winter the goats got sick and it looked as if they were going to die. I couldn't tell the difference between a healthy goat and a sick one, but my father said that if something wasn't done quickly it would travel to the brain and then he might as well bury them. I could already see the goats in their open graves, their skinny legs sticking up in the air, but then I asked myself how anyone could dig a hole in winter; surely the ground would be too hard. One day I took the shovel and started digging at the edge of the garden just to see, but my sister told my mother, and she slapped me because I was digging up the rhubarb plant.

When the goats didn't get better my father decided that they had to be moved into the house, but my mother objected. My father said that he didn't give a damn about the neighbours or the relatives; his goats were sick and had to get better. He hauled the playpen out of the attic and placed it to the right of the stove. He built a box for the other side and placed a goat in either container, and pretty soon the wallpaper was stained with yellow and brown streaks. My mother said it was a shame to have animals in our living room and what would people say, but my father looked her straight in the eye and told her to stop complaining. Within two weeks the goats were back in the shed, and a month later they were allowed to graze again. The teacher didn't appreciate this change because we both started to miss Mass again, and she felt that religion was more important than animals and she said she would tell my father. I think she did, too, because one day she told me that she hoped I would not grow up to be

as stubborn and impolite as my father, and then I knew that he had told her to mind her own business.

I always looked forward to the month of August. Even though we had to get up at eight o'clock to take the goats to the field, we didn't have to hurry back for school. Sometimes my mother would make sandwiches and tell us to take our sisters along and stay with the goats for the day. I never did let my younger sister come along, because she was a tattler and because she was even shorter than I was. If she followed us anyway, I would throw stones at her and she would run home crying. The sister who was a year older than I could come whenever she wanted to. I liked her because she was tall and skinny and one day I hoped to be as tall as she was. After we had selected a good spot for the goats and driven the pins into the ground, we would lie back in the grass and stare at the passing clouds. Some of them looked like herds of sheep and others seemed no bigger than a feather. But we especially liked the big clouds that had odd, dark shapes. They frightened us because we thought of them as monsters and exotic animals we had seen in books. My sister said that God pushed the clouds across the sky and that they were signs. I never did see God's hand pushing them, but I supposed that He was hidden below the horizon and that He gave a strong push from there. My sister also said that if it rained while the sun was shining they were holding a carnival in hell. I told her that that was impossible, because the flames would melt the rain. She said I had to believe it, because otherwise I could not be a good Catholic, and God would definitely send me to hell just as He did with all the Protestants.

Towards the end of August my mother became very agitated. My father's birthday was coming up soon, and where would she find the money for the drinks and the food and the new wallpaper to cover the mess the goats had made?

Two days before the birthday my uncle phoned and said he was bringing everybody down in his truck, and my mother became even more nervous. That evening my father came home early because he didn't feel well. He had been chewing aspirins all day and still his headache had not gone away. My mother said he worked too hard and it was no use, we would never have any money anyway. That night there was suddenly a lot of noise in the house and all my brothers and sisters were screaming. When the doctor arrived he said it was too late, and that even if my father had lived the clot in his brain would have almost completely paralyzed him. All night the phone rang, and every time my mother would tell the same story and cry. She called my uncle and he came a day earlier. He had not even had time to clean out the truck, and all my uncles and aunts smelled of cow manure because they had had to sit on chairs placed in the straw, and whenever he braked one or two had lost their balance and fallen over, until finally it happened to all of them. In the afternoon my mother took me up to see my father. A part of his face was blue, but I didn't think he was dead because his eyes were open.

That evening the parish priest, the neighbours and the relatives gathered with us in the living room to say prayers. Everybody got down on his knees, but before the rosary the priest said a few words: Death came like a thief in the night. It roamed about the house like a pack of wolves. I felt very uncomfortable because my knees were on the edge of the carpet. Through the mumbling of the prayers I started thinking about what the priest had just said. Then I realized that they might take my father away because death was a thief. This made me cry, and soon I couldn't stop. My sobs drowned out the prayers and then somebody came, picked me up and took me away. I didn't want to go to the strange house because I was afraid I would wet the bed the way I sometimes did at home.

But at home my mother always woke me up at midnight so usually my bed was still dry in the morning. I told them I didn't want to stay but they showed me my bedroom, which was covered with special wallpaper showing an alternating series of elephants and giraffes. They marched in locked step towards the four corners of the room. I had never seen so many animals of the same species before and they set my mind wondering. For supper they gave me smoked eel and told me I could eat all of it. This made me happy because I hoped that eating a lot would prevent me from wetting the bed. That night I dreamed it was raining in hell, and I could feel the warm steam rising up around my body. When I woke up I felt cold and wet and realized what had happened. I quickly ate my breakfast and ran home. I didn't even say good-bye.

That evening I had to milk the goats and they made me furious. Eileen stepped on my big toe and I had to raise her bodily to free my foot. Maureen planted her hind leg in the pail and, try as I might, I couldn't get it out. I finally hit her so hard that she jumped up in the air with both hind legs and knocked the pail over. Maggie gave less trouble but I got her only half-milked. The barn had become too dark to see properly.

The day after the funeral the miller came around. Even though he was a Protestant, he was my father's best friend. Sometimes when we were told not to play with Protestants, we would say, "But what about the miller?" My mother would answer, "That's all right, he and your father are grown men." They would sit around the table and argue religion, and once in a while they would drink a beer. Then my mother would say to the miller, "It's a good thing you come around, otherwise that beer would still be sitting there at Christmas." My father and the miller never agreed on any point they argued. They would go on and on until my father said, "Well, let me

show you then," and would go up to fetch his Bible. He would open it carefully and leaf through it until he had found the passage. "There it is." But the miller would not even glance at it. "What good is a Catholic Bible to me? Ours is different. When you come to my place, I'll show you." That would end the discussion. I don't know if he ever showed my father his Bible; maybe he never did.

My mother sold the goats to the miller and when he came to the gate that day he went straight to the barn, but the goats were not there, so he came into the house. My mother told him that the goats were still in the field and that I would go with him to fetch them. He was a very tall man with a pointy, bald head. I could barely keep up with him. He walked straight ahead and from behind I could see the receding sun bouncing off his pate. He untethered the goats and gave one to me. We started for the house which was about two miles away. Soon I began to tire. I had to run to keep up with him even while the goat was dragging me along. When we got to the top of the dunes he stopped and waited for me. He said, "You'd better go home. It's getting dark." He took the third goat and disappeared over the ridge.

I sat down to rest. The sun could no longer be seen, and the forest at the bottom of the hills grew darker and darker. Nearby, I could hear howling. I looked at the sky, and just above the horizon an elongated dark blue cloud was forming. First it assumed the shape of a rhinoceros, then it stretched into a crocodile. It frightened me and I wondered if God was pushing it or if at night the devil took over. Then I heard the howling again. "Wolves" I said. I got up and looked around. Nothing stirred. The cloud was still moving. When I heard the howling again, I knew it must be wolves, and I started to run. I ran straight down the hill. The sand got deeper and deeper and I could barely move. I was trapped. The wolves could not be far away now. I screamed and yelled, but no one came to help.