

FICTION

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Soup-Bone Bucolic

FIGURE THIS: one time on a farm I pretended to dig for gold but unearthed a goat. My parents had gone off on ostensibly the one and only dirty weekend of their marital career, consigning my sister and me to a week of apples and crazy chickens, dogs that spent their days outside, territorial bulls guarding pastures and a fat and thin farming couple.

I didn't wear overalls, only got my hands dirty in jest. For breakfast the rosy-cheeked matron fed us a mixture of Rice-Krispies and Cornflakes. Her husband gave me an old collapsible army shovel his grandfather had used to dig himself a homey little hole in the blood and gore of one or another of World War One's permanent fronts. A good shovel, its end came to a point, probably to eviscerate the enemy with if they ambushed you while you dug out the latrine. The old man drew maps for me with X's on them and no north, south, east or west whatsoever. I'd climb what fences needed climbing that day and dig a shallow pit. Finding no treasure was the thing, to be assured of nothing; success came with digging three feet down to confirm this expectation.

The map he drew in the chicken coop made me lose my nerve forever. Between putting bad eggs into an egg carton the old farmer pulled out a carpenter's pencil and sketched some geography. The stink was terrific. The stubble on his rounded, bony chin shone white like nails. He wore a long extinct cowboy hat with a ripped brim, strap dangling under his chin.

"You know," he muttered while doodling, "my wife cheated once. Back when we lived in the USA. Some poet guys who used to do drugs and travel in boxcars. And me overseas with the mili-

tary, in Korea. I told her to write me love letters. Instead, she bought a car in San Francisco and shipped it over with drive-away. The car showed up totally trashed. She didn't care, invited the two beatniks who'd driven it for dinner and they decided to stay. In their spare time they were a couple of queers. Freeloaded for two months, swigging wine and doing God knows what with each other and her. They took turns writing me letters on Benzedrine, letters all of one unbroken paragraph, no periods, just commas, typed on rolls of paper towel. She'd sign. Best damn letters I ever got. Wish I could meet them. My wife said they both had goatees. Course, I'd probably boot their balls so hard they'd fly out back of their assholes. Maybe I'd kiss them though. Ever kissed a man? Don't worry, I ain't about to molest you."

He finished sketching and tapped the pencil against his teeth. "Yeah, best damn letters I ever got. I wrapped 'em all with a piece of ribbon my mother wore in her hair. Great ribbon; I got memories of it too Anyhow, sitting in a foxhole in Korea, I figured it wasn't my wife on account of the typing. See, she doesn't know how to type—a dead giveaway."

He went back to the rotten eggs. "Yep, best damn letters"
I took the map and scrambled.

It was a map for closed eyes. The X marked a spot in the centre of a recently ploughed field. Dust filled my pockets and shoes. I climbed over the fence with the shovel balanced on my shoulder. A row of dandelions straggled along the thin shadow of the fence's railing. The place to dig couldn't have been more obvious: a mound of dirt just ten feet from the fence. Never before had I found such a definite place. Normally his map was a vague blueprint that my imagination brought alive, always fifty per cent in my head, following it the way you jump from floating raft of branches to floating raft of branches in the brown river after the storm. I hopped from one instruction to the next on the crumpled napkins he traced my inspiration on, the map nothing but lines for tampering with. But today left no chance for invention, everything laid out so carefully I still wonder if he meant me to find the goat. Or had he assumed it dead already?

The mound of dirt looked like a pillowcase stuffed with live sparrows. When I speared my shovel into the top of it the earth buckled under me. I put the point of my shovel straight down and almost leapt on it before noticing a tuft of hair vibrating between the soil. I staggered back. The goat struggled free, threw off a coffin of earth and stood, blinking red eyes in the sun. It had a filthy white coat, probably aswarm with lice and ticks happily free of the burial. Its horns were just stubs, like wax candles after the power comes back. When finished blinking, the goat gave me a comprehensive once-over and walked off towards the chickens.

I recognized the goat from the fold. Despite my disappointment at finding something at the end of my shovel—because I hate surprises—I managed to overlook my own concerns to wonder what the old farmer had in mind when burying the beast: perhaps a hatred or horror squirrelled up for so long it had outgrown all usefulness and now came out rotten and absurd, transmogrified into goat.

His wife called. We all ran to eat. During dinner the old man tried attracting my attention by glinting light off his fork into my eyes, but hunger overruled all distractions.

The goat showed up again in a riverbed, where running water widened and pooled for a time before continuing. You could have cut me up with a knife and fork. Its back legs stuck straight up out of the water. The river passed the goat by on either side like a circle around nothing.

Clad in underwear, I crawled along the river's surface, dove down and unhooked the rope attached to a sack of bricks on one end and the goat's neck on the other. The two of us swam ashore. Trout glinted silver as they shot off in the waters. A chorus of toads croaked.

The goat shook itself off with civility, took its dapper goatee and trotted off into the forest. I waited for the water to evaporate off my body.

Getting back to the main pasture I found the goat lovingly rubbing its face into the seat of the old man's pants. The old man was trying to plant carrots and no amount of his back-handed slaps stopped the animal nudging him off balance.

The couple's farmhouse had an extra large ketchup tin with dried flowers sticking out of it on a stripped shelf and a stained, hand-sewn tablecloth, intricate as the past, tacked up to the wall. Light struggled past windows onto photo albums antique unto themselves. Nobody remembered the names or faces therein. You counted the folds and wrinkles on the old lady's face and came to some kind of age span. But for a better guess you observed her behaviour. Every time she pulled a cigarette away from her lips you witnessed a movement adjusted by every other person she'd seen smoke. If aware enough to catch the nuances you knew exactly the low-down types who'd influenced the style of her smoking. In the morning the old man swaggered into the kitchen the way some forefather once had. The couple were parrots: in every movement a thousand inflections, predecessors guiding their efforts. The cumulative centuries of breeding, forced on them for free by genetic imprints, combined with their "lived" years to jerk their behaviour over. And they also had wills to appease. Distilling the three elements let you count the years these old people had lived like rings in a stump.

The old man swore he'd taught Satan some tricks. "You taught him piss," his wife said.

In the forest leaves slid along my cheeks. Rain sloshed in my gum boots. The storm had finally arrived. Waves of a nearby pond ran skittishly, in a series of broken lines critical of each other's advance. The flats of mud lay barren at the edge of the pond, long grasses hissing snake-pits of noise. Black clouds marched along the ridge, thundering in their boots. An eagle flew like a jackass in gale force winds. A flotilla of ducks surfed the waves.

I'd seen the old man disappear into the forest, a coil of twine around his shoulders. I tailed along furtively. If he'd had eyes in the back of his head he would have worn spectacles there too, horn-rims circling the skull. Trees and weeds parted for him. I wormed my way into thickets he slid through without a nick. He kicked the goat ahead, moving its stubborn hide. The storm a sound in the dark at the top of the stairs.

He hung the goat from the branch of an arbutus. Without protest—the goat didn't kick, didn't emit bargaining, but rested its

eyes, tongue lolling. The old man was gaunt as beef jerky. His spine hadn't calcified into an uncompromising pipe yet. He climbed all over the tree, up and down it, without catching overalls on branch or leaf. He surveyed the goat spinning on its hempen necktie, then gazed behind himself, right at the place I hid, right at me, then left.

I climbed the tree, took the jackknife from my pocket. Laying on the branch directly above the victim, with one hand underneath where my blade bit the rope, I severed the hangman's line. I thought I might hold the goat up by the rope. That's inexperience with gravity for you. Both animal and I dropped from the tree. I bruised my tailbone and water poured from my eyes. Not a breath of spirit to me, I couldn't stand. The goat survived fine. Its life gelled with good fortune. Looking me in the eye it just acknowledged predictable fate, me being the executor for this current round of saving grace.

I ran back to the farmhouse, entering through the back way: the cellar. The old man sitting by his fire didn't raise chin from neck. The goat stood on its back legs outside the window bleating forgiveness and entreaty to the drowsy old man through the glass.

One balmy day the old man came out of a black spell (he'd spent most of the morning in the garage, coming out occasionally to smoke, control some fit of exasperation, then returning) and shanghaied me into accompanying him to town. Our relationship—passive outside the goat—implied that in other matters we would be gagged by politeness, friendly even.

He owned a barely serviceable pickup truck, one notch over unsalvageable and degrading at the rate of uranium. We rode the wreck into town to pick up groceries, the steering wheel twirling as if nothing more than an excuse for show and tell. Juicy bugs blew up colourfully against the windshield.

Halfway there he started to sing the praises of speed bumps. The suspicion of an offing came to me. From then forward I was sensitive to everything.

"You know, Gabe, I love speed bumps. They're an excellent thing."

"Yes, I like them, Mr. Carter."

“No more beautiful a-clanging, Gabe, than when a car with a shallow muffler meets the resistance of a speed bump. It is my private church bell. You a religious boy, Gabe?”

“No, not me Mr. Carter.”

“You will devise your own religion, son. Believe you me. You will devise it. Everyone does. And you might call it politics, or reason, or facts or common sense. You might even,” and here he shifted down for drama, “call it murder. We all need something to rage against. If you don’t have something now you will later. Hopefully your rage will find a constructive target. Mine has. I guess.

“Anyhow, your reasons will arrive,” he continued, “be they flawless or absurd. Carry things out. I personally love speed bumps, the way they curve like a mound of dirt, say, in a grave, love their smoothness. You know that kind of asphalt moulding? Boy, Gabe, I even love the colours they paint them. That traffic-sign yellow. Sometimes they’re white. Know what I mean?”

I think at that instant I had temporary omnipresence of mind. We stopped for gas. While he went into the bathroom, I opened my door, leaned out, and saw the goat—a leather belt wrapped around its mouth to stop the bleating, wired to the chassis of the truck, riding dangerously close to the ground. I jumped out of the cab and crawled underneath. He’d wired it in five places. I didn’t care how long the old man took in the bathroom. The goat said as much as hello to me. I opened my jackknife and inserted the double ends of the wires into the socket where the blade used to be. A corkscrew in reverse, I unfastened all the fetters and dragged the goat out from under the truck by the belt wrapped around its mouth. This accomplished I slipped the belt off its mouth and fastened it—end in belt loop making a choker—around the goat’s neck. Everyone in the gas station stared while the goat fought against leaving the truck. Couldn’t that animal tell the difference between its Samaritan and executioner? It remained true to the old man past the brink of sanity. I tugged until the goat heeled and then us two took a little constitutional along the highway. The day was made for walking your goat.

Perhaps the old man knew a shortcut, or maybe he took the long way home. Perhaps he flew that truck like a space-age shuttle. Maybe he mapped the last frontier along the way. What does it matter? He reached home way before we did, with groceries and

other provisions. I thought he'd hurl a mouthful at me but I was getting to realize this would never be the case. He wanted me to frustrate him. Love and hate played at odds in that brain. I don't know if he wished to tilt the balance or maintain it. I let the goat go. Of course the beast ran right up to lick Mr. Carter's hand, dust in that old man's face no river could come between.

He drew water from the well. The well was an old miracle: nowhere in the vicinity could you get water in such quantity and purity. He wore a pajama top and some old greasy trousers held up by suspenders but sagging nevertheless at the belly, covered throughout with breadcrumbs that he'd poke at with a wet fingertip, place between his front teeth and click away on. Strands of hair poked between the buttons of his pajamas. Dew evaporated into the morning wave of heat. His bumpy face sprouted patches of beard. He spoke passionately, seeking publicity for his soul, while I held the jug for him to pour water into: "Don't take nothing from me when I go, son. Take my grave to a swamp and lay it out there, lining it with the bones of a mangy goat. Put me down among the rot and decay of the swamp. And don't—do not!—whatever else it is you do, don't let my wife scatter her indignant tears like seeds across my buried bones. Because you know they'll grow into plants and the plants will have roots and the roots will tell my bones the newest news and I will know the passing of seasons. I want no more seasons, son. You get me? And don't plant no fancy-shmantzy decor at my head. Two twigs held together in the shape of a cross by a rubber band will do. And that goes for the rites as well. No goddamn rites for this geezer. You find out when I'm dead and you haul off into my room. I'll be light as sun-dried shit by that time so you can just grab me by the hair in one fist and drag me outta those god awful winding sheets and keep right on dragging out the front door, right to the forest until you come to the first patch of muck, then scrape a couple three feet down. Hold me over the hole by the hair and drop me in like a sack a' potatoes. It don't matter what position I assume, or how many goddamn bones ya break. Then you can cover me with horseshit. Just you, mind you. No mourners! Not that anyone would come anyhow. And when you're done tamping down the horseshit and planting

the cross you can go and fuck off yerself. Now make me a promise, boy.”

I crossed my heart and carried the jug of water inside. My sister sat in a swing that hung from the overreaching arm of an apple tree. She sang a song in a flat, off-key voice.

Later that afternoon mice sabotaged the kitchen. Mrs. Carter, slumped on a stool, ate strawberries with whipped cream. My sister and I had already finished ours. The yellow paint on the stool under Mrs. Carter peeled and I felt strangely happy, very much a young man, watching, with the other two, mice chew holes in sacks of flour. We all felt super, on the receiving end of the best injections.

“I keep telling him to put out some poison but he just won’t. Then I’ve got to crush them with a broom, which ain’t so bad really. I like it. Hands-on. Doing the job yourself. But for Christ-sakes that old man of mine’s a real asshole,” Mrs. Carter said.

Our brown room had curtains thicker than the skin of a purse. The light went off and you saw symmetries of black. Nothing parted for footsteps. You negotiated every article, the floorboards following every movement with percussive: their way of complaining.

I crept over to where sister slept. “Hey,” I whispered. “Hey!” Louder still.

She rolled over, away from the yellowed wallpaper. “What? What is it? What do you want?”

“Do you hear it?” I asked, my face upturned towards the window. For a moment only silence came into hearing. Then I noticed—but only me—the reverberant bleating of the goat. My sister heard only the swish of drapes on the wall, the creak of the floorboards under my shifting feet.

“I don’t hear anything. Go to sleep.”

“No. Come with me.” I pulled her out of bed by the wrist. She didn’t recoil but didn’t help either. She moved only after hitting the floor, groaning, and got into her clothes. I already wore mine.

We went out through the kitchen. White mice scattered in a bubbling carpet before our feet. The moon rose, half-formed like my sister's consciousness, still troubled by sleep. I had her by the hand.

I knew the sound's source.

We came alongside the well. Lifting off the cover we both heard the goat screaming, the sound of thrashing in the water like the turmoil of a million fish. My sister's eyes filled with moon, a reflection broken only by flocking clouds.

"The goat," I said. "Help me pull it up."

The bucket was light and empty.

"I have to go down there," I said, "to get it."

My sister grabbed me by the elbow. "I can't pull you up. You weigh too much."

The old woman's voice hit us, I think, long after she'd released it because when we reacted she stood silently in the kitchen doorway, watching us, a nightgown wrapped around her fat body. Grey hairs trailed behind her head like smoke from chimneys under winter, the rest of her censored by darkness. "What are you two doing?"

My sister ran to her. The old lady walked with her over to the commotion. By now, she'd heard the goat's distress also. So, of course, she scrounged up a flashlight and reluctantly agreed that I should descend, never once mentioning her husband.

Blue ripples travelled up the stone sides of the well's mouth like in a bathhouse for angels. The moon glared into the hole. Perhaps some birds flapped past. My sister's and the old lady's grunts, as they lowered the bucket, changed to ghostly chants in the hollow confines. Even the goat's splashing and bleating took on the character of a soft summons. The bucket plunged in stages as the rope went from slack to taut and jerked my body. I thought for sure the bucket would snap off its rope. Some kind of phantasmagoria down there. I never wanted the rocking motion of the bucket to change.

Arriving at the goat I had to slip into the frigid water. Blood cubes rattled in my veins. I felt hooked up to a car battery. All the sensations experienced on the way down gathered like fire and leapt straight up and out of the flue. I quickly got the goat straddling the bucket for them to winch it out.

The old man turned up once the goat and I had been snatched from the jaws of the well. Mrs. Carter wrapped her robe round me but I still ached with cold. The goat, on a broken leg and in primitive shock, limped towards the old man, trying to look attractive and graceful. "What's happening?" he asked.

"Someone threw the goat into the well," she snarled at him. They communicated without mercy.

"It must have fallen in," he decided loudly.

"But the top was on when we got here," I corrected.

He glowered at me then, chin raised to the moon like a headhunter. No one has looked at me in that manner since. For some reason, though, it didn't scare me. He fondled the underside of my chin with fingers rough as a rasp. My exclamation had breached the contract. Suddenly he shifted his head down and looked penitently at the old lady. "Harrumph!" he said and stomped off towards the barn.

The old woman set the leg of the goat in a splint. My sister and I stared into the goat's nostrils as it screamed from the pain of the leg bone's broken edges meeting. With the last tie on its splint fastened, the goat hobbled off in the direction of the old man.

Shivering, I wandered off after it. My sister and the old lady watched, blank and uncomprehending, not part of our little absurdist theatre; the house's screen door slammed behind me. The goat yowled with every attempted step on its broken leg, until it just gave up altogether and held it in the air, tottering on three. I knew the goat's perverse guidance system would lead straight to its would-be murderer. We walked through clods of a recently ploughed field while stars winked over treetops like eyelashes.

The old man was brewing musty mushroom tea over a fire. The goat hobbled to him and pushed its head under his unfriendly hand for a petting. "Ever done psilocybin, Gabe?" the farmer asked. He proffered a tin mug, motioned to drink up, and I gulped the hot, fetid water, tasting topsoil and humus. He sipped his like Earl Grey at the parish picnic and patted the goat's head two or three times before clubbing it aside with a clenched fist. But the goat hung around out of arms' reach, totally infatuated. "I learned about mushrooms from those letters the beatniks sent. Nothing like sitting in a steaming jungle, ninety or so per cent humidity, in some dang-blasted hole you clawed outta the red clay and reading a

letter that's supposed to be from your wife—though you know it ain't—about how good a time she's having smokin' wacky-tabacky for the first time and doing funny mushrooms." For a while nothing happened, not even a rustle from the bales of straw we sat on or the clang of the bell around the goat's neck. One side of the barn wall exuded a fairly satisfactory glow. The old man starting to cry and the rain to fall seemingly occurred in tandem. "I normally make a pretty peculiar soup out of these 'shrooms," he roared through tears. "But for that you need a great big goat bone, and you just won't let me take out this damn animal." The goat had inched closer and he conked it on the head again; now the bell clanged. The goat instinctively relied on its broken leg to recover balance and it howled long enough for my gaze to descend its open throat and travel the length of its intestines twice around. Continually sobbing, Mr. Carter blubbered on: "That's the recipe for magic mushrooms those guys gave me. I tell ya, Gabe, there's nothing like reading a letter from your wife—though you know it ain't her—when your buddy's just been blasted to ass-wipe by shrapnel and his eyeless head falls into your lap and you stop shaking it awake because you realize it's ridiculous with no body attached, and look down to see your thumb stuck in the eye socket and you can't get it out and you jam his head between your knees and pull until your finger'll break, it's like some wedding band the skin's grown over, and you trip-up among the corpses, falling on mangled friends and get up and shake and shake your hand to get the head to fling off but it won't and those Koreans open up with a new salvo because they still see you alive, so you forget about the head and drop among the dead and all you think of is that your wife's shackled-up with two weirdos who're typing you love letters" The old man buried his head in his hands, still crying hysterically, only interrupting the emotional outpouring to sip tea. Years later I would bring this up at a Narcanon get-together as my definition—in the classic sense—of the word "bad-trip." The goat limped up to him and licked the tears away with a tongue floppier than a Christmas stocking. The man lifted his head and stared the goat down: "They woulda made magic mushroom goat's head soup outta you."

The goat bleated the equivalent to “I love you, you sad old bastard.” Little by little, we behaved more and more like flower children.

“Figures the one thing in the world that loves me also happens to be the one thing in the world I want to kill.” He dried his raw red face on a worn flannel sleeve. “Funny how my wife has nothing to do with it anymore.”

If the fire under the teapot ever transferred to the bales of hay only our dental records would identify us among the barn’s cinders. I placed my hand on Mr. Carter’s back to make his sobbing subside. The goat snapped at my hand—jealous I guess. In a flash the hallucinogen communicated that Mr. Carter needed to slough-off a painful history. I reached up, grabbed the zipper hidden in my hair and pulled it down to my crotch. The goat followed suit and our skins fell to either side. I stepped out as Mr. Carter and the goat stepped out as Gabe. We found the old man’s zipper and helped him out of himself. There, we had a new goat. Gabe spoke: “Mr. Carter, we are reinventing your religion.” The goat bleated in the affirmative. “Religion should free you from love and hate, not help them fester,” Gabe continued.

“No,” I (or Mr. Carter) said. “It’s mushroom tea that transcends love and hate.” We three laughed while I again pulled my zipper down, reappearing as goat. Gabe unzipped and Mr. Carter appeared from the folds. Goat became me, me Mr. Carter, Mr. Carter the goat, with no body mass lost in the process. We howled at every metamorphosis, a million laughs kindling an unprecedented warmth, mouths open so wide our jaws nearly unhinged. In the end only dental records identified us.