

Goat

John McAuley

My uncle had a goat once. It was a treacherous cunt of thing that would eat the shorts right off your arse. It thought it was the mightiest goat around. It used to climb, with great assurance and pomposity, hills that were not hills but irregularities in the lolls of fields. How did it look? It looked like a goat – it had white fur and a smig. But it carried on as though it was the most fantastic creature of all time. At no stage did anyone point out to this goat that it was just a goat and nothing more and nothing less.

I suppose, therefore, the goat was not solely to blame. My uncle, a balding singleton with no interest in anything really, hauled the goat around as though it was a dog and not a goat. It got, in this way, preferential treatment. More so than anything else that was about the place. It was the summer, a dry one if I remember correctly, when I first came into contact with the goat. It was in the shed, upon

some bails, and when I came looking for dry hay it simply refused to budge.

“Don’t go near that goat,” said my uncle, when he saw me lining up a kick. “If you know what’s good for you.”

And I listened, because he was a thick sinewy old fuck who’d never taken to anything but farming. He was about as miserable as anyone I ever came across. Counting the minutes you worked and jotting them down in a small leathery notebook he kept in a pocket. He counted every moment between my arrival through the gate, and my exit out the gate. My pay slip was a sheet from that notebook that sometimes had my weeks measured in seconds. But I was young and it was not about the money but more about the work, an out-in-the-fresh-air sort of thing. I remember the evening setting, the sun’s dip turning the sky from blue to red to black. Every joint ached, yet I always left with a feeling of accomplishment.

“Don’t touch that.”

It started one day when making dip for the animals.

“Leave it where it lies,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

He wrenched a green can of mix from my hand and turned towards the shed.

“Go check on the cows. I haven’t time for fooling today.”

On the way out of the yard the goat came tottering past on its way down to the shed. I stood for a while at the gate and watched my uncle hunker down and rub the goat under the chin.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he yelled when he saw me watching.

It continued during the following days.

We were laying posts for a new fence in the top field. He was holding a stake and I was hammering it in with the head of a sledge. I hadn't the strength I made out I had, and the head of the sledge wobbled about a bit on contact.

“Gimme that,” he said pulling the sledge from my hands. “You'll take the head off me and I barely fucking know you.”

I stood back as he lifted the sledge high and landed it down with a wallop. He measured the post quickly with a tape and said, “Go down to the yard and do a bit of sweeping. I don't need you here today.”

But of course with a fence there is need for a gate. When I reached the yard I took it upon my own initiative to start the mixer and get the concrete ready for pouring. I heaved a bag or two of cement from one of the sheds into an old rusted wheelbarrow and headed back out to the mixer, whirring away in the middle of the yard. It was heavy, with the two bags, and I had some trouble carrying it back towards the mixer. But I managed it, and was heaving shovelfuls of grey powder into the mouth of the mixer, when suddenly I caught sight of the goat appearing through the gate to the fields. He was followed by my uncle, carrying a large briar he had pulled from the hedgerow. He quickened his step considerably when he saw me in

the middle of the yard.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he roared, whipping my legs with the briar. “Did I tell you to start the fucking mixer?” he continued, “Did I? Did I tell you to start the fucking mixer?”

I didn't get a chance to answer. The briar had stung my legs badly.

“You've done nothing but cost me money since you arrived. You're a good-for-nothing little cunt. I should send you packing.”

I was trying to position myself out of reach of the briar. He followed me, circling around the mixer.

“You'll not get away with this,” he said. “This'll cost you. I'll take it direct from your wages.”

He was right up in my face now, and the goat, beside him, bleating away like his accomplice. I lashed out. Swinging the shovel – I never let it go; I had it clenched tight in my hands – I crashed it down on the goat's skull with a loud crunch. For a moment the goat stood still; there was almost silence, but then its legs collapsed beneath it and it fell dead in the yard.

Afterwards, I remember walking through the fields, the beauty of the hedgerows. It was the time of year for beauty.

John McAuley lives in Dublin