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Mercy Killing

Devin Latham

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Mercy Killing

Daddy didn't let them kid in the pens because of the mess, and not all mothers eat their afterbirth. Under the metal barn, flies teemed over pellets and urine. Four rows of silver eight-by-eight-foot pens stood on packed dirt. I followed Daddy between rows to the stale hay where the brown goat had kidded during the dark morning hours. Dogs trailed us with wet noses and hot, thick breath. They stunk, covered in their oils and filth. Tubby, the Great Pyrenees, stayed in the pastures with his herd. At the end of the barn, the brown doe licked the new kid clean. The white-bodied kid nursed, butting into her recipient mother's warm bag for milk. The kid's umbilical cord—longer and thicker than usual—curled into the old hay. Her hind end seemed heavy and oddly angled.

"Well, I'll be damned," Daddy said. We stared openmouthed with our hands gripping the top of the wire fence. The kid's two back legs held up two other legs that didn't quite reach the ground. She had two small tails, two ill-formed butts and vaginas—shallow slits of pink skin. I climbed over and picked her up, holding her out at face level. Her thin ribs pulsed with breathing. Her thick, purple umbilical cord wound to the ground. She held still in my hands. I saw that her eyes were the color of walnuts, and then I understood that her intestines, attached to her umbilical cord, were spilling out of her. She had too many. I turned her around, looking at her legs, her tails, and all her tiny hooves that hadn't yet hardened. She made my stomach hurt.

"I don't think she can use the bathroom," I said.

"I've never seen that," Daddy said. His forehead wrinkled. Hungry goats bayed from the pens and pastures around us. I put the kid down. She jumped with spunk, even under the weight of her absorbed flush-twin. She was oblivious to what she'd be in a day's cruel time. Without being able to use the bathroom, she'd poison herself. We moved flush kids and their recipient mothers to the clean pens under the barn once they kidded, but we never moved the six-legged kid and her recip. There wasn't much point.

Daddy and I found the six-legged kid before the morning feeding. We fed twice a day, and once we finished the morning round, it already seemed time for the evening round. The feed sacks sat stacked on pallets under the barn. Daddy ordered feed by the ton—a bill we had a

hard time keeping up with. We owned over three hundred Boer goats on our farm in west Alabama. South African Boer goats are white-bodied, redheaded meat goats that farmers don't eat. They breed them, show them, and sell them. We had forty-eight acres, and we used every inch. My half-siblings were nearly a decade younger than me. Their mother didn't go to the barn, so I was the only help Daddy had. I was fourteen years old.

After I took pictures of the six-legged doe, Daddy and I loaded up the orange Yamaha four-wheeler with two sixty-pound bales of alfalfa and two bags of feed. The goats bayed loudly in the surrounding pastures with empty bellies. Daddy stayed near the barn and fed each of the small pastures. A road ran through the property, cutting off forty of the acres. We called those forty acres "across the road." The recipient does lived across the road, waiting to be surgically impregnated. The recip weren't full-blooded or worth much money, but they needed to have nice bags and big barrels because flush kids grew big in the womb, and sometimes that got ugly. We moved the recip to the pastures near the barn when they were about to kid in order to keep an eye on them. I opened the gate to the forty acres and drove the four-wheeler fast toward the troughs. The first feed is the hardest when you're feeding 150 goats at once. The recip does heard the chain on the gate, and they took off toward the troughs. The sound of their hooves on the earth and their bodies rubbing together grew louder as they neared. Holding a bag of feed, I ran down the low V-troughs Daddy had welded, getting halfway down the line before the first bag ran out. The does dug their heads into the troughs, fighting for space. With wire clippers from the four-wheeler's saddlebag, I snapped the baling wire. The bale slumped open, and I threw flakes of rough alfalfa into the tall hayrack. I checked the water troughs, too, because Daddy stressed clean water. He said it was key to growth and fertility, especially in the heat, but clean water couldn't wash away what we'd done and what we'd yet to do.

I went to church three times a week—twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday. My parents were conservative and religious, but they didn't go. Daddy hated church, and my stepmother liked to sleep in. We called ourselves Baptist. I rode to church with the family down the street. They had two blonde-headed girls close to my age and a big white van that could seat eight people. I'd ride my bike to their house, or they'd pick me up, driving down our long gravel driveway. The girls giggled about the potholes and all the mutt-dogs that chased the van, biting at the tires. They never laughed at Tubby, though, because he was too smart to chase

cars. These were the kind of people who'd see a snake in the road, aim to run it over, back up to make sure they got it, and run over it one more time for good measure. We weren't like them. My family was country or maybe even redneck. We didn't have central heat and air. Our house was only half-built; the living room floor was painted plywood. But I went to church because I always liked church, the same way I always liked school. I liked rules and the simplicity of doing the right thing.

The old people at church were nice. They liked when I sang. They said my voice was a gift from God himself. I sang with our neighbors' two daughters. One time, one of those blonde-headed daughters told me I shouldn't have taken communion because I hadn't been saved yet. I didn't like her talking to me the way my stepmother did like I was bad. During a Sunday night service when I was twelve, the man who owned the petting farm five miles from our house asked me if I'd like to welcome Jesus into my heart. Daddy couldn't stand that man, so when I got home that night and told my parents I'd asked Jesus to come into my heart, I left out the part about the petting-farm man giving me the idea.

My parents came to the baptism, and Daddy stood in front of the congregation and read a list I'd made of ten reasons I'd asked Jesus into my heart. Standing above the white tub of water in the borrowed white robe, I listened to him read my words about "the indescribable feeling" Jesus gave me, reading things I'd heard grown-ups say before. The water was warm, and words were spoken, my nose held, my back bent into an arch, and then a gentle push against my forehead. I came up stoic—my holy emotion. I didn't see angels or feel heavenly joy, but even at twelve I didn't expect as much. I was baptized. I was a bona fide Christian. I was going to heaven. I had the right to take communion. I was good, and no one could tell me otherwise.

By the time I was fourteen, the farm had tripled in size, and I didn't go to church near as much. We traveled for shows most weekends. When we weren't traveling, Daddy asked me to stay home from church on Sundays so we could clean out the runs and worm the recips. We spent morning service forking up layers of matted hay, maggots, and manure that smelled so strong we could taste it. We loaded down wheelbarrows and sprinkled out lime bags. We watched kids spunk on fallen logs and try to act grown by mounting, fighting, and pretending to rut. When we are children and still believe our parents, we mirror what we see, and we do as we're told because that's minding. Even if it might be wrong.

When Daddy wanted to flush our goats himself, he asked John, the man who flushed our goats, to teach him. John agreed, but he kept out steps

on purpose, and after a big flush, Daddy would dig through the trash, learning what to buy, which kind of holding medium the embryos were kept in, and what kind of tubing was used to flush the embryos out of the donor.

Flushing works like this: You take a nice show doe and put a plastic cider that releases hormones into her vagina. A week later, you take the cider out, which makes the donor go into heat. You give her a hormone shot that makes her release twenty or more eggs, and you breed her (either artificially or naturally) to a nice show buck. You need about fifteen good-bodied recipes to put ciders in at the same time you put a cider in the donor, so that they're all on the same heat cycle. Seven days after you breed the donor, you put her under and hang her upside down in a gurney to find her uterus laparoscopically. You cut her open and flush out her embryos into a dish. You grade out the good quality embryos under a microscope. You inject the good embryos in pairs into the recipes' uteri. The point of flushing is to make more show kids in one season than the donor would make in her entire life. Genetics is like the lottery, and the more chances you get, the more likely you are to make a winner, which means money.

The first time Daddy practiced laparoscopic artificial insemination, the black doe started kicking hard in the gurney where she lay on her back. He practiced on a recip because we couldn't afford to practice on full-blooded show does. He gave her more xylazine to put her further under, but he didn't realize that he hadn't cut the bottle yet. He gave her three times what he meant to. She stopped kicking. Then, she didn't move at all.

"I think she might be dead," I said, standing next to him and watching as he found her uterus through his scope. He studied the coloration, searching for the pink knot—the corpus luteum—that signified a heat. He moved the scope up and down, the side of his hand hitting her shaved, iodined stomach.

"No, she's fine," he said, concentrating on sticking her uterus with the needle at the tip of the semen straw.

The doe's tail relaxed, and she peed on the concrete floor.

"She's pretty dead," I said as he worked.

"Well, shit." He pulled away from the doe's belly, holding the scope inside her with his right hand. He studied her hard and wiped his forehead with his left hand. "I'm just gonna finish." He went on like she was alive. He needed the practice. He injected the semen to meet the egg, but the embryo would eventually die inside the dead doe.

I don't remember where we put the body. We didn't bury them. We only ever buried one goat, and that was early on. So many of them died; it felt silly. I imagine Tubby watching his dead goats tied to the four-wheeler by the horns, dragged to rot across the road. Sometimes we waited too long and they pulled apart when we accelerated.

During kidding season, Daddy and I walked pastures in the early morning, looking for new, wet kids born to the night hollers of coyotes. The grass was grown up for the expectant recip mothers. They hadn't made much of a dent in the grass, but they'd made little dirt trails from the bottom of the hill up to the shed where their feed trough sat. The pasture sloped down into cedars and sweet gums. A low fog hung above the tall grass. The great white dog greeted us cheerfully but distant like they do. I said hey to Tubby and stuck my hand out. He sniffed the air and wagged his tail. That was as close as we got. Several recip had kidded. It was our job to catch the recip mothers, drag them under the barn, and put each mother in a pen with her new flush kids. Once one doe drops, they all start going into labor like it's contagious. Some mothers are better than others, and the slow mothers can lose their kids to the eager ones who take as many kids as they can.

In the overgrown pasture, Daddy called for me, and I walked up the pasture's slope with the grass at my thighs.

"What is it?" I asked while he studied the ground. I expected a dead kid—something ugly.

We stood over a dead fox. His red coat and long bushed tail contrasted against the wet, muted morning. His neck angled broken in the dirt.

"Tubby must have killed him during the night. I bet the fox smelled fresh kids," Daddy said, and we both felt proud. We looked at Tubby, who lay in the tall grass watching his does graze. By evening, the fox was gone. Tubby ate him. The buzzards came later. They came when death was certain and Tubby was gone. They came when all the flush goats were sent to a sister farm in Louisiana, when the show trailer was sold and the recip were left to starve and rot while Daddy found a different hobby and I left for college.

Tubby took care of the six-legged doe kid. Daddy should have done it the morning we found her. That would have been the right thing to do, but we wanted to see what would happen, how she'd progress. I should have killed her, but I didn't think it was my duty. It was Daddy's job, I thought. And to be honest, I was scared to take the life of something so new. Tubby didn't usually eat flush kids. They were worth a lot of money. They were his herd. But he ate that one, and I was grateful. Daddy and

I might have opened her up, looked inside her like we once did with a show doe that seemed to die for no reason. Kneeling on the cut grass in front of the show doe's open stomach, we never found anything inside. Tubby's intentions were better than ours. He protected his goats, even from us, even after they were dead. He protected them until he was no longer there. Daddy says he was poisoned. I think Tubby left us.

When we made more goats than we could afford to feed and the bill went unpaid for months and the feed company threatened to stop delivering, Daddy picked up a fresh kid—still wet with amniotic fluid—by the back legs. The buck kid was born small and sickly. His back legs were rubbery and weak. The kid didn't have the strength to stand up to nurse. He wouldn't make it. He wasn't a flush kid, and he wasn't even full-blooded. He was from a percentage show doe, and percentage bucks are worthless. We could have nursed him by hand, set up a heat lamp, and hoped for the best. If he'd made it, we could have banded him and made him a whether, but he didn't even have a good build. Daddy swung the upside-down kid in his hand like he was swinging a baseball bat. The kid let out a small bay before his skull broke against one of the thick wooden posts holding up the barn. Daddy dropped the kid to the ground, where he fell unmoving. I kept my face still and my mind thoughtless. But now I can't stop thinking about what we did. It's been so long since I've lived at home; I can hardly believe I'm the same person who kicked goats caught in fences, who slid her hand in birth canals to pull out kids that were too big to come out, who let pastured does get so thirsty they'd choke themselves on the lip of the trough for a drink of water.

When we create a thing, we have the onus to take care of it, but Daddy made like God and let his sired suffer. Near the farm's end, Sally Ann—the first goat we bought back when we didn't even know what flushing was—died at eight years old giving birth to a flush kid that never should have been put inside her. Sally Ann was a petite, black brush goat with a narrow barrel. Flush kids grow big in the womb. Sally Ann was too small to be a recip, but we needed to make more flush kids to pay the feed bill and pay for the show trailer. When it came time to put in ciders, we ran Sally Ann through the chute and said what the hell. The day Sally Ann died, Daddy told me to hold her horns as he grabbed hold of the flush kid's front legs inside of her. We pulled at both ends of Sally Ann, and she screamed while we sweated. The flush kid had suffocated in the birth canal. We ripped Sally Ann open to get the kid out. Sally Ann lay in a pasture like so many of them and bled out slowly, next to a dead kid nearly the same size as her.

When I was a child, I'd pull down maple branches, and Sally Ann would stand with her front hooves against my stomach, trying to reach the leaves. She'd let me pet her, and pieces of her black hair would stick to the sweet sap on my hands. One winter, Tubby saved her from a pack of coyotes. He fought off the coyotes as they ripped holes in the side of her face. But Tubby left, and Daddy and I watched Sally Ann die, wishing she wouldn't. Killing is easy except when it's not. Daddy should have shot her in the head, but instead he let me sit in the wet grass and pet Sally Ann's scarred cheek as she lay on my lap. I wouldn't cry and refused to speak, afraid my voice would give me away, like my pride was bigger than her life, as her blood ran in thin rivers down the slope of our land.