

# Goat

**F**or Pollyread and Jackson, walking down to school around the same time each morning was the same and slightly different. The twins lived in Top Valley, a village high in the Blue Mountains. “On God shoulder,” Mama said. Mornings sometimes, when cloud and mist were all around, there you’d be on God’s shoulder and you couldn’t see his face or his feet. (“Only his belly button,” Pollyread said once, looking around for Mama, shocked at her own boldness — and never said it again.)

They looked down the path they were walking, and where a moment ago there was Stedman’s Corner and Marcus Garvey Primary, then Cross Point, then Cuthbert Bank and Content Gap, in steps that a drunk giant might take to the hazyblue sea far below — now all of a sudden there was only cloud, thick as Mama’s soup, slicking the grass and stones with moisture and making the path where they walked all their life mysterious and new, and sometimes dangerous.

This Tuesday morning the whole world seemed to be moving. The clouds played hide-and-seek with the sun in the steep valleys. You could almost hear them laughing as they twirled around like sails. Pollyread in front, they went carefully down the steep, winding path, walking around the larger boulders, stepping over the gleaming stones. Mama would not forgive them for slipping and getting their uniforms dirty.

Around them, hilltops, stones, sometimes single trees thrust like fists or fingers through the swirling clouds. All of them familiar, all of them, this morning, new, different.

And this morning, out of that green-and-white mystery of stones and floating trees, out of it this perfectly normal Tuesday morning came the goat.

One moment there was just the clouds and the rocks and the bush, the next moment it was there. Huge, its dark head with grandpa beard unfurling a pair of horns like Jericho trumpets.

*There*, floating in the path, in a pool of brightness from an unseen sun. The twins could only see a huge head, with a billowing beard and horns like they had never before seen, on a goat or any other creature. It was like a mask, of a size that would've had a body as big as a minibus carrying it. Unsupported, it floated next to a big round rock — just where they would walk.

The twins stopped dead. There was no way around it. The goat's eyes pinned them, flashing dark fire. The eyes seemed sightless but seeing everything too, down into the very darkest corners of their terror.

For a second or two, all was still: the goat-mask, the twins, even the clouds. They saw something like teeth. The goat tossed its head.

Then the cloud shifted and it wasn't there anymore. As effortlessly as it had appeared, made of cloud but very real, it was gone.

The rock behind it reappeared, humpbacked, familiar. Cloud rolled away on silent wheels, unfurling the valley and hillsides like a banner. The twins were surrounded by things well-known and intimate, comforting as Mama's arms. But they were shivering.

Jackson's hand touched Pollyread from behind. "Go on nuh?" She didn't, couldn't move.

Then the ground vibrated beneath them. As if Jackson's touch had tilted it. The hump of rock that the goat-head had hung in front of trembled. The guango tree behind it shook with a sound like rattling teeth. And as they watched, the hillside in front of them slipped away and crashed into Bamboo River below. They looked down: A meter ahead of their feet was — nothing. What was left of the hillside looked torn and bleeding, earth dribbling away like blood.

Birdsong and the soft rattle of leaves filled the pool of silence that settled around them.

Pollyread and Jackson looked into each other's wide bottomless terror. First, the goat. Then . . . it hadn't rained for weeks, the earth hard as cement. There seemed no reason for the landslide.

"Maybe Mass Cleveland get a new goat," said Jackson tentatively. "I hear him talking to Poppa one day, say he looking about some high-class ram from a man in Saint Ann that bring them from foreign. No ordinary ram goat."

"Well, that certainly wasn't no ordinary goat," said Pollyread.

All day they'd waited, expecting some other extraordinary thing to happen. They had no idea what they were expecting, but they'd know it when it happened. Like the goat. But nothing happened. No one said anything unusual. No one did anything unusual. They went through the day feeling as if an X was marked on their foreheads. But no one looked at or spoke to them in any way strangely. And they had hardly spoken to anyone, even each other, all day.

Now they were lying in bed on either side of the curtain that divided the room they shared. They'd said

their prayers rather more quickly than normal, though Jackson had remembered to give thanks for being saved from serious injury and possibly worse. They hadn't mentioned the goat directly. On the other hand — they knew. But they weren't sure of what the goat *was*. Or of how to talk about it.

Jackson turned on his back and cupped his hands behind his head. He sighed as he gazed up into the black roof.

"I hear Mass Cleveland tell Poppa he going to cross-breed" — his tongue relished the word — "the foreign ram with them scrawny-looking goat him have running up and down hillside eating out people vegetable garden."

"So the new goat not going to eat vegetable and flowers? Is that you saying?" He heard the change in Pollyread's tone, like she was turning over the page to a new story.

"Don't be stupid! Goat born to eat everything, even condense milk can. One goat can't be different just 'cause it have a different father. I meant," he went on, shaping his words carefully, "that the goat that Mass Cleveland crossbred, if he get the foreign goat from the man in Saint Ann, would be a different kind of goat from what we custom to see in these-here parts. You understand now?"

That tone infuriated Pollyread, but sometimes Jackson couldn't help himself, she deserved it. She would tell him he wasn't her teacher so please not to speak to her like she was no dunce up in front of the class. When Mama heard him speaking like that, she would tease and call him "Politician."

"Different in what way, Mr. Know-it-all?" asked Pollyread, her voice sweet as custard, but with lime on the edge.

Pollyread felt her brother stiffen on the other side of the curtain, and was pleased.

"It will look different," he began irritably. "It will be taller and have more meat on it and —"

"From all those cabbages and flowers and cucumbers, I suppose," his sister said in her driest voice. "The same ones Mass Cleveland goat dem eat now, and still skinny like puss."

"Cho man, Polly," Jackson cried out, hitting his mattress. "You too stupid!"

She could not let that pass. "I wish to do no more than remind you," she said in *her* teacher's voice, "of our respective placements according to last term's reports, and indeed for some time now."

There was a long sigh from the other side of the curtain, which Pollyread's little grin swallowed like a sponge.

“Anyway,” she said after a while, and quietly, “I don’t think is Mass Cleveland foreign goat, even if he get it already.”

“So what you think it is?”

“I think,” she began, and then turned and put her head right up close to the curtain where she knew her twin’s was and, wondering if God was still listening to them, said in a whispered rush, “Ithinkisaduppy.”

“Duppy?” Jackson’s voice came right back, loud.

“Sh-h-h!”

They listened for a sign of the parents in the next room.

Generally, singly or together, they discussed anything unusual with Mama when they got home from school. But they hadn’t been sure how to mention the goat, or of what sort of discussion might follow: Mama frowned on talk of duppies and obeah and other “manifestations of darkness,” as she termed such matters.

Besides, Mama had been in bed when they reached home, an unusual development in itself. A strong woman who often worked beside Poppa in the ground they planted, she seldom felt poorly. But this morning she’d complained of dizziness and a funny feeling in her stomach. And after supper, though she was feeling better, Poppa had shepherded her to bed at the same time as the twins.

“Duppy?” Jackson’s voice caught between disbelief and agreement.

“Is something,” said Pollyread, soft but firm. “Something not from this place.” Jackson knew she didn’t mean just Top Valley. “A spirit thing.”

“Like . . . rolling calf?”

“I suppose so,” said Pollyread, trying now to sound casual about the fantastical shape-shifting creature that gave every child nightmares.

“Rolling goat maybe.”

Pollyread had to giggle, but her brother’s attempt at a joke evaporated immediately into the darkness, leaving their thoughts to settle like slow running water into the crevices of this dark idea that had been gathering shape all day.

Silence, like rope let down into a well.

Out of that well of silence, rising like the mist that was almost surely rising somewhere in the sleeping valley, came Jackson’s voice:

“Our Father. Who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name . . .”

“Thy kingdom come,” Pollyread joined in.

“Thy will be done . . .”

“On earth . . .”