

Goat

Synopsis:

After burying their infant son Mico, Jerry and Dina are left hollowed by grief, their home haunted by memories of what might have been. When a strange, half-human, half-goat creature is left on their doorstep, Dina clings to it as a miraculous second chance, while Jerry wavers between revulsion and a desperate, reluctant love. As suspicion and fear grow in their small barrio, the couple flees, determined to protect the child they have come to claim as their own. But deep in the hills, they are confronted by something older and more powerful that calls the child back, shattering the fragile illusions that held them together. This story was inspired by the author's fascination with how grief and folklore can entwine to expose the rawest corners of the human heart.

Jerry stood to one side of the small, white-painted coffin, dazed by how clean its surface was, how small. The afternoon had turned raw, the wind pushing against the priest's words so they arrived warped and indistinct, like sounds carried through water. Dina's hand kept tightening in his — not asking, exactly, for reassurance, but needing to know there was still something warm tethered to her, some pulse that might carry her forward. They had buried Mico with the blue socks he'd worn the day he first stood upright — as though standing had been a promise — but in the last feverish days, he had not stood, only curled, knees drawn up, as if remembering the shape of a womb.

It was not that Mico had been sickly. No one had warned them, no one had spoken the word fragile. He had coughed once, then slept, and by the time they reached the hospital there was nothing left to rouse. The nurse, voice gentler than it had any right to be, pressed her hand to Dina's arm and said it clearly, as if clarity might ease the wound: Time of death, four thirty in the afternoon. Eleven months old. That was the sum of him, a measure spoken like the tail of a prayer, already closing its own door.

She moved stiffly now, accepting the condolences of neighbors who pressed her fingers, awkward with their fear of the mystery, and all the while she felt the tiny ridges of Mico's back beneath her hands, remembering the last time she had tried to turn him to ease his breathing. There should have been an answer, Jerry thought, watching the white box settle into the ground. A reason, a word, something to hold in place of the child they would never see again.

In the house, the stillness was worse. It clung to the curtains, to the corners of the floor where the mop hadn't reached, to the faint soap scent of the clothesline out

back. Dina felt the presence of Mico everywhere — the damp hair that had smelled of talcum, the small dent his thumb had left in the blanket folded by the crib, a dent she could still see from the doorway, as if the child had simply stepped away for a moment.

Jerry set down the keys too loudly, flinching at the sound, then went to the sink to pour a glass of water. The faucet had developed a stutter — water came in little coughs, thin against the steel, almost like a child’s breath — and he shut it off halfway, swallowing against a dry, stubborn ache in his throat.

“It’s not fair,” Dina heard herself say. The words were nothing, paper-thin, but they shook out of her as if they had waited for permission. “It’s not fair, Jerry.”

He could not answer. There had been tests, and blood drawn, and white-coated men who refused to look directly at them. There had been a blank sheet of results, numbers that meant nothing, until someone finally said it might have been a virus, a rare one, the kind that could happen to anyone. Which was no answer at all, Jerry thought. It was a theft without a thief.

He sat on the edge of the couch, elbows on his knees, as if he might stand again, go somewhere, do something — but there was nowhere to go, no hospital to rage at, no remedy to demand. Only the blue blanket still crumpled by the crib, the one Dina could not bear to pick up, as if leaving it there might coax Mico back.

By evening, Dina forced herself to think of rice on the stove. She measured the grains into her palm, rinsed until the water ran almost clear, though her fingers trembled and the grains clung like tiny seeds to her skin. Jerry had taken the broom to the front steps, sweeping the dust in slow, anxious arcs, as if the act might fix something, even though it no longer mattered.

That was when the cry came.

It did not sound like any baby's cry Dina had ever heard — lower, somehow, but thin, a wail pulled through a torn screen. She looked up from the stove, pulse snagging hard against her ribs. It came again, closer, a ragged echo of grief made alive. Jerry heard it too, pausing with the broom braced against the doorway. For a moment they locked eyes, neither speaking, the hush so deep that the cry seemed to burrow into their bones.

She moved first. The screen door creaked against her shoulder as she stepped outside, dusk clinging to the last edge of the horizon. The sound was unmistakable now — shaped like hunger, like need, coming from just beyond the metal gate.

Jerry followed, dust still on his knees from where he had knelt to scrub a stubborn spot on the steps, the broom clenched in his hands like a weapon.

On the worn cement path, under the tired swing of a dim light, lay a bundle — limp, rag-wrapped, breathing. Dina saw the cloth shift with each faint exhale, saw one tiny hand slip out and flex against the night air. But the head — her throat closed hard on itself — the head was wrong. Goat's head, the ears soft and folded against coarse brown fur, thin white horns no larger than her thumb beginning to press through a newborn's skull. Its body, though, was heartbreakingly human.

The creature turned toward her, its eyes deep, unfocused, almost dazed, its mouth opening to let out that same thin cry — a cry that sounded, impossibly, like a child who knew it had already been left behind once before.

Dina's knees buckled, but she did not fall. Jerry's shadow stretched over her shoulder, his breathing ragged, the broom handle creaking in his grip.

"It's a joke," he said, but the words rang false, collapsing even as they left his mouth.

Dina crouched down, reaching for the rag, her hands moving with a mother's muscle memory, as if no sense could stop them. The creature nuzzled against her wrist, searching, its tiny hooflike fingers clutching at the hem of her sleeve.

It smelled of milk, of straw, of something living — but underneath, unmistakably, the sweet sourness of Mico.

For a moment, she almost pulled away — the downy shoulders rising toward that inhuman face, the thin lips with a slit of a goat's tongue barely visible when it cried. But its body was warm, undeniably warm, with the same fine shivers Mico used to have after waking from a nap and needing to be gathered close.

Jerry shifted behind her, unwilling to come nearer. Dina heard him swallow, heard the stiff rasp of his fingers on the broom handle.

“We can't,” he managed, voice caught between begging and command. “Dina — we can't bring that inside.”

But she was already lifting it, rag and all, the small weight folding against her chest with terrifying trust. She felt it breathing, fragile, determined, and her heart lurched with a terrible, unstoppable tenderness. The rag slipped just enough to show its chest — smooth, delicate skin, faint blue veins shining beneath the surface, a place for a heart to beat — and Dina saw it, beating fast as a bird's.

“It's alone,” she said, hating how her voice cracked. She sounded foolish, raw, like a child herself. “Jerry — he's alone.”

Jerry lowered the broom, shoulders sagging as if she had stolen something from him. *He?* The word rattled around his head like a loose nail. It might have the body of a human, but its head said everything — it was a goat. Maybe a cursed goat.

“That is not him,” he whispered, almost breaking.

Dina stood up, steadying the bundle against her shoulder, and the creature — the goat-child — made a small, wet sigh, then tucked its head against her neck. Its small hand patted her collarbone with an instinct older than memory.

“I know,” she breathed, and felt something hot and wild inside her nose, a force so strong it threatened to drown her. “But it needs me.”

The word *me* echoed in her mind, somehow shameful, somehow greedy, but unshakable.

Jerry backed away, wiping at his forehead. He watched her, too afraid to touch her, too afraid of the wrongness and rightness tangled in what she was doing. The swinging light above them made the creature’s shadow long and sharp on the ground, like the silhouette of something waiting to grow.

Inside, the clock ticked on as if nothing had changed, but when Dina stepped through the door, carrying the creature, the house seemed to inhale around them, waiting.

She brought warm water in a chipped porcelain basin — the same one from Mico’s first weeks — and set it carefully on the low table. The creature whimpered at the change of light, shifting in her arms, pressing closer with a blind, urgent trust. Its breath caught in soft, kittenish hitches, and Dina felt her chest twist with the memory of another small life needing her once, just like this.

Jerry stood apart by the kitchen threshold, arms folded in a posture that looked defensive but felt closer to surrender. The smell of it clung to the room, shifting the air until even the walls seemed to flinch.

Dina tested the water with her knuckle. Not too hot. She peeled back the rag slowly, as if unwrapping a blessing or a curse, revealing small shoulders, arms, a belly,

the skin a faint copper tone that matched Jerry's, matched hers. At the first splash of water, the creature startled, letting out a thin cry so familiar that it seemed to carve right through her.

She lowered it gently into the basin, using the same reverence she had shown Mico, letting the water slip around him. His tiny hooves kicked once, then stilled, soothed by the warmth. Dina washed the thin brown fur at his crown, careful not to catch the soft horn buds, no bigger than her nail.

The creature leaned its head against her wrist, rooting with a damp, eager mouth that made her flinch, remembering the way Mico had done the same. It was so easy, she realized, to fall back into mothering, as if there had never been a break.

She looked back over her shoulder. Jerry still stood, pinned to the doorway, one hand white-knuckled on the frame.

"You see?" she said, voice raw but threaded with something fierce. "He knows me."

Jerry could not answer. His mouth opened, then closed, no words forming. In the lamplight, he looked smaller, slumped, the familiar worry line above his eyebrow etched deeper than she had ever seen.

They did not speak of taking him to the barrio hall, or to the priest, or to the clinic. Once the creature had crossed their threshold, no other possibilities seemed real. Dina fed him from a bottle, the same yellow-capped one from Mico's weaning days, guiding the rubber teat to those strange, delicate lips until he latched on, eyes fluttering shut with a dreamy, instinctive peace.

They kept the windows latched and the curtains drawn, as if the night itself might be listening. Jerry could hardly stand to look directly at the creature. Instead, he fixed his gaze on the dirty dishes stacked near the sink, on the clothes piling in the

basket, on the faint water rings spreading across the table. But in the corners of his vision, he still saw it — the tiny hooves twitching, the velvet ears flicking, the fuzz of its muzzle damp with formula.

Neighbors came once or twice that first week — cautious, polite in the way people are around a house marked by loss. Dina would hover half-hidden in the shadows, telling them she was resting, not yet ready to see anyone, her voice carefully calm. Jerry would stand behind her, nodding, closing the door before the visitors could look too closely.

At night, the creature bleated with a voice that made Jerry's heart seize — the same pitch Mico had used when hungry or afraid. The walls seemed to vibrate with that sound, holding something neither of them could name.

As nights passed, the bleats grew louder, twisting from a baby's thin wail into something unmistakably inhuman. Dina rocked him until her voice gave out, humming lullabies with a stubbornness that felt almost holy. Jerry, frantic, prayed no one outside would hear. He had given up trying to stuff rags in the window gaps; they did nothing now. Once, in desperation, he tried to hold the creature's muzzle gently shut with trembling hands, but Dina had pulled him away, eyes blazing.

One night, the creature made a different sound. A soft, broken "mama," shaped through a goat's warped voice box, cracked and wet but clear enough to pierce the dark. It was looking toward the window, as if calling to someone outside. Jerry froze. Some part of him wondered if the word was meant for another mother, not Dina at all. But Dina only heard her name in it. She froze, then smiled — a smile so raw and astonished that Jerry had to look away.

"I knew it," she whispered, voice shaking. "He thinks I'm his mother."

Then Jerry saw a small shape — a teenage girl — perched in the crook of their old santol tree, peering through the branches with wide, hungry eyes. For a moment, he thought she might have seen everything: Dina by the window, the creature nestled against her shoulder, as real as any child. When the girl noticed Jerry staring back at her, she scrambled down the branches and ran, fast and clumsy, disappearing into the shadows of the street before he could even call out.

By morning, the air around their house felt tight. Jerry had barely drawn the bolt when he heard voices gathering outside, too many to ignore. At first, just two neighbors; then five; then a knot of ten or more, crowding by the gate with cautious, brittle politeness, their eyes reaching past the rusty bars as though they could pry the walls apart with stares alone.

Someone — he couldn't tell who — had brought a priest from the next barrio. The priest's voice carried above the murmurs, soft but unyielding, asking to come inside and bless the child, "the devil's child," some were already calling it.

Dina stood by the window, shoulders rigid, the creature pressed so tightly to her breast Jerry feared she might crush it. Its small head tucked under her chin, breathing quick, a tremor running through him that reminded Jerry of Mico's final shallow breaths.

He stepped outside, forcing a smile that wobbled at the edges. "There's nothing here to see," he told them, though his voice trembled. "We are still in mourning."

"A chubby woman spoke fiercely for them all. 'My daughter climbed into your santol tree last night,' she said, loud enough for every ear to hear. 'She saw what

you were hiding. Why are you keeping a monster there?’ She looked him straight on, unflinching. ‘Let us help you, Jerry. We will cleanse your house.’”

The priest shifted, clutching a small bottle of holy water, waiting for Jerry to yield.

Jerry glanced back through the open doorway. Dina met his eyes, shaking her head once, slow and final.

And something rose in him then — protective, desperate, nearly savage. No one, he thought, no one would take this child from them after everything they had already lost. He would not let Dina suffer again, not if he could stop it. And for the first time, looking at the creature’s small, helpless shape clutched to Dina’s chest, he saw Mico there — his son. Jerry stepped in front of the gate, blocking their view, the broom handle still leaning by the door, a quiet reminder of the last barrier he had.

“You will not come in,” he said, more certain than he had ever been. “This is our house. Our child.”

The priest frowned, confusion and worry in his gentle eyes. “Jerry,” he pleaded, “you must let us see.”

Jerry shook his head. The morning sun felt cruel, revealing every flaw in their yard.

Inside, Dina rocked the child with a fierce tenderness that startled him. It made a tiny sound, a half-shaped word, “Mama,” pitiful and raw, and Jerry felt something collapse in his chest.

He turned back to the gathered faces, standing taller now. “There is nothing here for you,” he said again, steady and final. “Go home.”

For a moment, no one moved. Then a dog barked from behind a neighbor's fence, breaking the spell. The chubby woman spat into the dirt, a curse or a warning, and turned away, muttering that they would regret this.

One by one, the neighbors drifted back down the lane, clutching their gossip like prayer beads.

They moved quickly after that, as if the neighbors' footsteps had left a ticking clock behind. Dina packed what she could: a few of Mico's clothes, rice measured into a glass jar, a bar of soap, a single faded towel. She worked with a silent, relentless focus, holding the child close each time he whimpered, pressing her face into his strange, musky hair as if trying to memorize the scent.

Jerry searched every corner for coins, a candle stub, matches — anything that might help them on the road. The walls felt like they were closing in on him, each nail and window reminding him how small and trapped their world had become.

By nightfall they both understood — no words needed — that they could not stay. They would go on foot, leaving the owner-jeep behind so no one would notice their departure. Dina tied the child to her chest with a scarf, knotting it so tightly he could not slip free. Jerry checked the latch on the gate twice, three times, as if even that could somehow hold back the terror pressing in on them.

The barrio had fallen into a silence too heavy to trust. Somewhere a rooster crowed off-beat, unsettling in the dark.

“We'll go by the river,” Jerry whispered, voice shaking. “No one will follow through the fields at night.”

Dina nodded, holding the child closer. He stirred against her, tiny hooves twitching, letting out a sound — almost a word, or a prayer — and Jerry felt something loosen in his chest, a helpless tenderness breaking through.

They stepped into the night with careful steps. Beyond the bamboo fences of their neighbors, the barrio was wrapped in a hush, lamps glowing behind curtained windows, neighbors keeping vigil with sharpened suspicions.

Past the old acacia tree, the trail sloped toward the riverbank, still muddy from weeks of rain. Jerry carried their bag, its weight nothing compared to what he truly feared losing.

Dina walked beside him, the child pressed against her ribs, breathing steady, impossibly trusting.

When they reached the river, Jerry paused, listening. The water moved like black oil, slow, catching slivers of moonlight and breaking them into trembling shards. Dina stepped closer, voice catching.

“Will we be safe?”

He could not answer. There was no safe, not anymore. But he placed his hand on her back, steadying her, and nodded.

They crossed on stones that felt like broken teeth, clinging to each other for balance. Beyond the water, a narrow footpath led into the hills — promising distance, if not refuge.

Jerry turned back for one last look at the house — the window left open, the blue blanket still folded on the crib rail, the smell of Mico somehow clinging to the walls. For a moment he thought he saw Mico standing there, whole, impossibly alive, waving them away.

He blinked, and the vision was gone.

Dina touched his arm. “We have to keep moving.”

He swallowed down the ache and took her hand. Together, with the child between them, they stepped into the darkness, away from the house.

They walked until the sky began to shift, the blue of dawn creeping over the hills like a question. The river lay far behind them now, their feet heavy with mud, the path narrowing through ragged lemongrass that slapped at their legs.

Dina slowed, her breathing jagged, the child tied against her chest growing heavier with each step, head lolling as if in a deep, untroubled sleep. Jerry reached out to steady her, but she clutched the child tighter, unwilling to let him slip.

Then, through the paling light, something stepped out of the grass. It stood tall as two men, shoulders broad, a thick pelt of wiry fur hanging from its ribs, horns curving back in heavy, yellowed crescents. The face was undeniably goat, its eyes steady and too bright, the color of old honey. It moved with a patience that made Jerry shiver — as if the creature had been searching for them, or waiting for them, for longer than either could imagine.

It lifted one roughened hand, palm open, unmistakably calling.

The child against Dina's chest stirred, a tremor running through his small body. He lifted his head and bleated, soft and clear: "Mama."

Dina flinched as if struck, her knees giving out beneath her. "No," she gasped, voice already splintering. "No, he is ours."

But the child twisted, small hands reaching toward the towering figure, a sound of trust and relief spilling from him.

"No," Dina pleaded, weaker now. "No."

Slowly, gently, the child unknotted the scarf at her shoulder. He slipped down, landing on unsteady legs, and turned once to look back at her — an apology in those impossibly old, goatish eyes. Then he bleated again, tender, hopeful, and followed the creature into the tall grass.

Dina collapsed to the ground, a thin, raw sound breaking from her chest — not a human cry but a high, rattling bleat, the kind only a goat makes. Again she bleated, desperate, calling for the child who would never come home.

Jerry stood frozen, watching her. Something split behind his heart, and a terrible laughter rose through him — wild, unstoppable. He laughed until it rattled his skull, until the dawn wind burned his throat, while Dina kept bleating, frantic and broken, as if the sound itself might call the child back.

They stayed there on the path, the dawn rising wide and merciless around them, Jerry's laughter clattering like broken bells, Dina's voice hollow with animal grief, until no language was left between them, and no one remained to listen but the wind.