

## *A Real Nuisance*

Like so many of Natalie's early memories, this one is full of color: the fresh yellow straw, the red blood that was pooling way too fast, the silver bucket kicked aside, the damp, quivering brown fur.

"Hurry, Natty, but don't slip and fall!" her father ordered as he placed the towel-wrapped newborn in Natalie's waiting arms. "I'm going to try to save the twin."

Natalie's moist and frightened eyes widened. "What about Daisy?"

"I'll do what I can," he said. Then he touched her arm and reminded her quickly, but calmly, "And I'll do what I have to do."

Natalie swallowed hard and nodded.

"Now you go on and do what *you* have to do. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she replied, her firm response hiding the anxiety that prickled up and down her spine. She was eight years old then. What if she messed up?

It was early January, a cold, black night softened only by a slice of pale moonlight reflecting off the crusty snow. Natalie hurriedly picked her way across the frozen yard with the extraordinary bundle in her arms. It was not a good time of year to be born, but sometimes the goats didn't listen to reason -- or season.

In the house, Natalie held the kid tightly against her bulky parka with one hand while she drew warm water in the deep white porcelain set tub, the one her mother used to wash the milking equipment. Still holding the little

goat -- she bet it didn't weigh more than six or seven pounds -- she scooted to the bathroom and grabbed more clean towels.

If only her mother had known Daisy was close to delivering, she wouldn't have gone to the town meeting. She'd be there, in the house, doing all these things with confident, experienced hands. Daisy was her mother's favorite. She was the first dairy goat they ever owned, the reason they decided to buy more goats and start the farm. Her mother would be devastated if something happened to Daisy, or any of her babies.

Natalie rushed back into the kitchen, threw the towels on the table and then swung open the freezer compartment to the refrigerator, plucking a plastic container of colostrum from the side shelf. Mother goat's first milk. A good thing they kept some for emergencies. The kid would need it to survive. One-handed because she was still holding the baby, Natalie set the double boiler on the stove. She filled the bottom pot with water, set the colostrum in a second, smaller pan and nestled it on top of the larger pot before turning on the heat. The gas flame rose with a *whoosh*. Natalie turned it way down; the precious liquid needed to warm slowly, so it wouldn't turn into pudding.

Next, she returned to the set tub and turned off the water. "Okay, here we go," she murmured as she carefully unpeeled the soiled towel, letting it fall on the floor, and lowered the shivering kid with both hands into the warm water. Natalie still had her coat on because she couldn't take the time to remove it and the bottoms of her sleeves got soaked. "Easy, now. That's it." The goat was so small that, with Natalie's support, it stood in the tub with water up to its neck. An exact miniature of its mother, the kid was solid brown except for a little white star on its forehead – and, of course, the long droopy ears. It was so new, so cold, and so weak, it didn't protest at all, but

let Natalie bathe and wipe it clean. She paid special attention to those big ears that distinguished Nubians. She even remembered to check its eyes, to be sure no eyelashes were turned under.

*Wow. Could she see that well then, to have done that? To have actually seen the kid's eyelashes?*

Seated, finally, in a kitchen chair, with the tiny goat dry and wrapped in a fresh towel, Natalie offered the warmed colostrum in a baby bottle. Confused at first, the kid caught on quickly and eagerly sucked down the nourishment. Natalie took in a full breath, then let it out and smiled, feeling her body relax with relief. As she gazed upon the helpless creature in her lap, her heart filled with love while her mind raced ahead to what she needed to do next: dip the kid's umbilical cord in iodine soon – real soon -- and find a heat lamp for the stall so Daisy and her babies would be warm.

She had plowed through her anxieties and did what needed to be done. And yet, the peace that flowed from this proud moment was short-lived. Seconds later, a rifle shot rang out from the barn. Natalie stiffened and sat up. Tears sprang into her eyes as she hugged the now orphaned goat and bent to kiss its head, imploring it not to worry, and promising that she would always be there, to take care of it.

A long, hard winter followed and, much to Natalie's delight, they had no choice but to let the kid stay inside with them. Natalie fixed its bottle and fed it in the morning before school, then again when she came home, and once more before bed. On the fifth day of its life, while it wriggled like crazy, Natalie held the little goat tight on her lap while her father used a hot debudding iron to burn out the two nubs on its head where horns had started

to emerge. Natalie knew it was necessary; dairy goats with horns could seriously hurt one another. Still, a minute turned into eternity while the sizzling iron created tiny, terrible wisps of smoke. When it was over, relief once again. Natalie had a warm bottle waiting to comfort her baby.

The orphaned kid quickly outgrew the wooden crate Natalie's father had hauled in and soon, it was moved into a newspaper-lined playpen by the wood stove. Natalie and her best friend, Meredith, took the goat upstairs to Natalie's room where they dressed it in baby clothes. In her snapshot memory, Natalie could still see the bright yellow bonnet edged with white lace and a pink sweater with green turtle buttons. The girls laughed themselves silly watching the kid cavort happily with its bonnet brim flapping and its tiny hooves clicking like small tap shoes across the channels of wood floor in between rugs.

The goat of course thought Natalie was its mother and followed her everywhere, an endearing, but sometimes problematic situation. Hence, the name: Nuisance. In some ways, Nuisance was the little brother or sister Natalie never had. Everyone in the family developed an enormous soft spot for the little goat and forgave it some awfully bad habits, such as munching on the house plants and sampling everything it found in the waste basket. The kid was so spoiled, it even rode, buckled into a seat, with the O'Reillys in their van. Natalie told the goat her deepest secrets, combed its short brown hair with a doll's brush and lovingly stroked its Roman nose and long ears hundreds of times. If her parents had let her, Natalie would have allowed the goat to sleep in her bed, or to stand, with a bib tied on, atop a chair beside her at the dinner table.

As winter turned to spring, Nuisance grew and the little goat's world expanded -- to the yard, to the barn, and finally, the wide green pastures filled with other goats. But Natalie's world started to shrink, and fade.

The color is gone from these memories. They are all in black and white: Natalie, colliding with a beam in the hayloft and nearly knocking herself out; tripping, falling, and splitting open her lip in the grocery store parking lot; tumbling down the basement stairs and winding up with a dozen bruises and a huge, sore egg on her forehead.

It's not that Natalie suddenly couldn't see anything; she just couldn't see as much. The outer edges of her field of vision – the periphery – was suddenly blurry. So, she missed seeing important parts of her world, such as the white-painted asphalt curb in the parking lot and the edge of the top stair to the basement. As she explained it to her younger cousin: “Pretend your hands are binoculars, Florie. Roll your fingers. Now. Can you see me?” The little girl had nodded. “Yeah, I can see – but only parts of you. It's like the world got shrinked.” And that was it exactly, Natalie had thought: *it's like the world got shrinked*. She didn't always have the complete picture right off, but with a little time she could piece things together.

*Please don't take any more away. Please. I already have to wear a hat all the time – I'm keeping the bright light out. And I do those eye drops twice a day. Isn't that enough?*

Reading became a struggle, too. Natalie was given special equipment that she had to push from the library to her classroom on a rolling cart. She had always been a little small for her age and it was a lot of work maneuvering that big cart around, but it enabled her to enlarge and darken the letters in her textbooks so that she could see them more easily.

Her confidential talks with Nuisance began to sound like prayers: *I'm scared, but I don't want anyone to know, not Mom and Dad, and not even Meredith, 'cause I don't want them to worry and look at me like I'm different. That's why I have to work so hard at school to be perfect, to make up for some of the dumb things I do. I just can't help it. Like bumping into people when I'm pushing the cart, or tripping over Stephen Handley, who was sitting in the hall yesterday. I broke his pencil and ripped my favorite black pants. It was so embarrassing . . .*

When she started middle school, the cart simply stayed in the library and with classes in several different locations every day, life became far more complicated. Meredith, and sometimes Coralee and Suzanne, knew Natalie was having trouble and helped guide her through the hallways and get to the right place at the right time. But while Natalie could always count on Meredith, the other girls were hit and miss, which sometimes left Natalie stranded, and embarrassingly late to class. Twice – and this was especially humiliating -- she even walked into the wrong room and had to be directed out by the teacher, while the students stifled chuckles in the background.

Never was that going to happen again, Natalie swore to herself. That's when she started counting. *Forty-two steps between Mr. Hewitt's ancient history class and the doors to downstairs . . . six steps to the water fountain . . . fourteen steps to the girls' room . . .*

“We have to do something,” Natalie's mother insisted after dinner one evening when Natalie was nearing the end of eighth grade. She stacked the dinner dishes on the counter and sat down again at the table. “Dr. Rose says her eyesight is getting worse, not better.”

“What do you suggest?” Natalie's father asked. He had pliers and was trying to fix the buckle on a goat halter.

“Well, I had a note from school, from this woman who helps Natalie prepare homework and take notes.”

Her father looked up. “What woman?”

“What’s her name, Natalie?”

Natalie picked at a hangnail on her thumb. “Mrs. Russell,” she replied glumly. “She’s the vision teacher. She travels around to all the schools.”

“Yes. Mrs. Russell. A nice woman,” Natalie’s mother noted. “She’s been very helpful. She’s suggesting that Natalie learn Braille.”

“Braille?!” That certainly got her father’s full attention. Natalie heard the clink of the buckle as he set the halter on the table. “What are you talking about, Jean? Natalie doesn’t need to learn Braille! She’s getting straight A’s in school! She’s writing beautiful poetry about the mountains. She baby-sits. She helps me in the barn -- ”

“No one is saying Natalie’s isn’t bright or capable, Frank!” her mother interjected. “Mrs. Russell is simply looking down the road – ”

“Yeah, well, tell Mrs. Russell to look *up* instead of down.” He sounded angry. Exactly how Natalie felt, too. No way did she want to learn Braille. That was for blind people. No way was she going there!

And yet, deep down inside, Natalie worried that her mother was right. So she remained silent, torn between her mother’s frightening intuition, and her father’s shuttered and emotional defense.

Natalie’s mother sighed and got up to wash the dishes. Her father stood and pushed his chair in. Natalie asked if she could be excused to go do her homework, but paused in the next room to listen.

“Don’t rush into things, Jean,” her father added, quietly, before he walked out the door. “That’s all I’m saying. Let’s be optimistic. Give Natty some time. Her eyes will get better.”

Memories fade to gray after that because nothing was very clear anymore. The only thing for certain is that Natalie's eyes were not getting better. The summer before she started high school, there was even a panic when the pressure in her eyes increased so much that more surgery had to be scheduled. It would be the seventh time Natalie had been in the operating room for her eyes.

*When will it end? Why is this happening to me?*

Her father told her not to worry, that the next surgery could be the turning point. One day, he even brought home a small pink stone -- from the feed store of all places -- that had the word "hope" etched into it. "They had these in a little bowl on the counter," he said, pressing it into her hand. "Keep it in your pocket, Natty Bean. Don't ever forget there's always hope." And Natalie had hugged her Dad, who, in his worn denim jacket, smelled just like a sack of grain.

"Is there something you would like to do?" her mother suddenly asked two weeks before the scheduled operation. "Something you've always wanted to *see*, Natalie?"

*What? Was she afraid I'd come out of surgery with no sight at all?*

"The ocean," Natalie blurted. A mistake. A huge mistake because that trip to the beach was a disaster. Her father was bored, just sitting under an umbrella all day, and he worried about the goats the whole time. Her mother, who had had some skin cancer on her nose, had to sit in the shade, covered up the whole time. She didn't even want to take a long walk. And then the one time Natalie summoned her courage to go out in the ocean a big wave knocked her down and scared her half to death. No. They never should have gone.

Fortunately, the surgery was successful. The pressure went down and Natalie's vision did not get worse.

But it didn't get better either.

A year later, just before her sophomore year began, Natalie was told by her eye doctor to prepare for the worst and, although they disagreed at first, her parents decided to send her to a special school where she could learn the skills she needed to cope with vision loss. On the last morning she was home, Natalie finished packing her suitcase and carried it downstairs, dropping it heavily by the front door. She did not want to be leaving for this special school hundreds of miles away.

Without saying anything to her mother, Natalie took a dog biscuit and went to the barn to say goodbye to Nuisance. It was early, just after dawn, and the fog was lifting. Natalie could feel the moisture on her face and hands. She still had a small circle of vision, but just to be sure, as always, she counted the fifty-eight steps from the back kitchen door to the barn. The feral cat that waited for a pan of leftover milk every morning meowed at Natalie from its post on the cement stoop near the milking parlor. Yellow light spilled from a row of square glass panes. On the other side of the wall, Natalie's father and Uncle Jack were already busy. Milking machines hummed and pails clanged.

Inside the barn, the smell of fresh hay from the loft above and the pungent odor of manure from the pens, mixed and surrounded her. The goats moved around restlessly in their pens, eager to be milked and get their morning portion of grain.

“Hey, Nuisance!” she called sweetly, standing at the enclosure where her goat shared quarters with twelve other Nubians. “Nuisy Juicy!”

Instantly, several goats rushed to where she stood, greeting Natalie with a chorus of “wahhhhhh” and competing for her attention. One of them stood up against the rails and leaned over to tug on her sweater. Another nibbled at her fingers.

“Stop!” she had to tell them, although not without a smile. When she moved her hand to push away the biggest aggressor, another goat stole the biscuit. Was it Nuisance? Her heart dropped; she couldn’t be sure. A blur of brown and white, all of them. Natalie couldn’t see well enough to tell them apart anymore.

“I’ll be back,” she promised the goats, hoping Nuisance heard. “I’ll be back,” she repeated, whispering, “and everything will be okay.”

She believed it.