

## The Dance (nonfiction)

As we got closer to the day when Nyla, our first goat, was to kid, we prepared with all of the care of first parents. More care, actually, than we took when we prepared for our firstborn, Kate. We were naive, then, and full of the hubris of youth. You fall in love, you make love, you have beautiful babies, easily, joyfully and with great simplicity. We were older now. Kate had been followed by four younger siblings and we had learned that while life was full of the joy that we discovered when we had begun our lives together, it was anything but easy. Now we craved simplicity and approached our new country life with the simplicity with which a general draws up battle plans.

Nyla came to us already bred. A lovely LaMancha doe, she was stately and quiet. She was not overtly affectionate, but she tolerated our ministrations. As the day grew closer to her due date, I checked her compulsively, six, even seven times daily. Goats are consistent about delivering on time, for LaManchas between 146 and 150 days from breeding. We had Nyla's breeding date from the farm where she was born and bred; we knew we were getting close. We devoured guides to dairy goats, musty old books on animal husbandry and, of course, the internet. I called my goat mentor daily until she sighed in exasperation. "Look, you are a *midwife*, for Christ's sake. How hard can this be? You have it easy!"

She didn't understand. Yes, I had delivered hundreds of babies, but these babies were from mothers who spoke the same birth language. Even the women who only spoke Arabic or Spanish sang the same song. I could tell where they were in labor by their breathing, the swaying, the sweat, even the smell. I did not speak goat and it felt incredibly out of control.

Finally the day arrived when the morning Nyla check showed that changes were taking place. She was hollowed around her tailbone and there was a long rope of mucous hanging between her legs. She did not seem in any significant discomfort; I anticipated that we had several hours to make certain that everything was prepared. I looked over the supplies; iodine to dip the umbilical cord, gloves, lubricant. We had bottles in case Nyla decided not to nurse, odd looking straps to tie around the kid if additional traction was needed, even a feeding tube in case of a baby too weak to suck. My midwifery training had insisted upon sterilizing the clamps and scissors that would be used to cut the cord.

Towels, I had overlooked towels. I rushed through the house, gathering every towel that we owned. I hoped it would be enough.

Towels in arm, I burst into the barn. Nyla looked up at me then back down again, chewing her cud. I looked her over. The only change I could see was the long rope of goo was gone. Upon closer inspection, I saw some of it sticking to her hocks, I guessed she had licked the rest clean. I returned to the van to unload the kids and make lunch. Maybe we would have new babies by nap time?

Naps came and went and dinner was prepared, eaten and cleared. Tim arrived home from his city job in time for dinner and he shooed me away to the barn, saying he would tend to bedtime routines while I tended to Nyla.

When I arrived at the barn, Nyla looked at me unconcerned. I sat on a haybale and watched. The goo was back, Nyla still worked her cud. As I sat and watched, I could tell that she was uncomfortable, she shifted her weight from one side to the other. She pawed the dirt and settled herself in the disturbed dirt only to clamber to her feet once more and paw again. Tim

brought me Noah. Only four months old, he still depended on me to fill his belly and I snuggled him close as he latched on and drank deeply.

Tim sat beside me on the hay. “Well, what do you think? Soon?”

I looked at him in dismay and wailed “I don’t know! How am *I* supposed to know?! I am not a vet!”

He drew back, surprised, before breaking into a laugh. “The mother of five, midwife for what...oh, sixteen years? And you are nervous about a *goat*?!”

If I didn’t have a baby in my arms and my legs dangling above the ground I would have stomped my foot. Instead, I kicked it against the hay. “Don’t patronize me! Do *you* want to do this?!”

He rolled his eyes. “You wouldn’t let me.” He took Noah from me and left the barn. I knew that he was right, but it still irritated. I was unsettled and afraid. I looked around at my supplies. *This* was the simplicity that we wanted to find in farming? Give me a birthing center with overflowing exam rooms, any day!

I watched Nyla. Paw the ground, lie down, get up, pace, paw the ground. Around and around in the barn. I wished I had my coat. This might be Texas, but February is still cold, even in a barn with hay and livestock to keep you warm. I heard laughter coming from the house and running footsteps, as our teenagers burst into the barn. Bless them. They each carried something, Katie had my coat, Christin had a camera. Grace had a car seat, cradling the sleeping Noah. Tim brought up the rear, a cup of coffee in his hands, a peace offering. He knew better--this time--than to ask for details.

Everyone staked their seat on a bale of hay and we silently watched. No longer pacing, Nyla was clearly now pushing. I had worried that I wouldn't recognize goat pushing, but it was unmistakable. This was one place, at least, where the language *was* universal. She drew in her breath, hunched her back and grunted as she bore down. Two pushes, three, they came closer together now. Finally we saw a bubble appear between her swollen vulva, the bubble growing with each push. I knelt behind her to see. Visible inside the cloudy fluid we could see two small hoofs. As she continued to push, a small nose appeared above the feet, a perfect position! The contractions came faster and Nyla was bellowing now with each push, a deep guttural noise that moved the earth, a noise I knew very well. After each push she took two or three steps, forcing me to scramble on my knees to keep up with her peregrinations. All seemed to be proceeding according to the books when with one momentous push, the bubble burst, spraying amniotic fluid all over the front of my coat and the feet and nose disappeared as if sucked back inside Nyla. I looked at my audience in shock. They gazed at me, all smiles and anticipation.

“What now?” they asked.

Panic struck me. “I don't know!” Somewhere in the back of my mind a warning chimed. Without the sack...what? A dry birth? Suffocation? I knew that this was not the case with women, but this was not a woman! The flood of adrenaline gave clarity to my confusion and I made a decision.

The baby had to come out--now. I yelled for gloves, sliding them on my shaking hands. “Lube, lube!” I barked at one of the girls, who coated the gloves with enough K-Y Jelly for three months worth of sex. I reached out to touch Nyla's back, cooing to her in tones that I hoped she would recognize as calming. “Hey there, sweet girl, you are doing great.” I lifted her tail and

stared at the unfamiliar genitals. My usual landmarks were gone. There was a perineum, all right, and a vaginal opening, but labia and clitoris were gone. I tentatively touched the introitus with a lubed finger. Nyla bolted to the other side of the barn. I looked in disgust and frustration at Tim. “I *told* you I couldn't do this!”

“What do you want me to do?” he offered.

“Hold her!”

He followed Nyla to the other side of the barn. grasping her collar with one hand, he threw his leg over her and pinned her between his strong runner's legs. He looked over his shoulder “Like this?”

“Perfect.” I gritted my teeth, “just don't let her move!” I slid two fingers in. They slid in easily enough, but nothing made sense. I was accustomed to reaching in and feeling heads! Large, solid heads with wrinkly skin that forced their way out into the world with insistence. Instead, I felt...my fingers swept the vaginal vault trying to make sense of the unfamiliar territory. I pulled my fingers out. “I can't feel anything! I can't tell what anything is!” In desperation, I ripped the gloves off my hands, tossing them in the direction of the teenagers watching with fascination. “Don't let her go,” I warned Tim, and slid my hand in again. Two fingers, three, finally, folding my hand in on itself, I slid in to my wrist. I closed my eyes. I drew to mind the drawings I had seen of goats and the different birth positions. I began to make sense of what I was feeling. A foot, and another. A face resting on top of the feet. Follow the legs up, yes, they are attached to the same shoulders as the head, no tangled twins, that I could tell, anyway.

Distantly I heard Nyla bellow as she gathered herself in another contraction. Her muscles tightened around my hand, clamping around it until I could feel the bones shift and grate against each other in my hand. "Towel!" I demanded and one was handed to me. I wiped first my face, then the vulva, dripping with a slick combination of KY and Nyla's own lubricant. The contraction over, I withdrew my hand slightly, catching the two legs just above the tiny feet. I remembered what the books had said, not to pull straight out, not to really pull at all, but simply to guide the feet down and out along the curve of the mother, and only with contractions. I waited. I felt Nyla's next contraction before I heard it, the tightening and the groaning beginning shortly after. She pushed, I guided. The feet reappeared. She pushed again, they slid a bit further out. My hand was now pinned between the feet and the bones of Nyla's pelvis. It hurt, it really hurt, but I didn't let go. As the contraction eased, I looked at Nyla's bottom. My hand was swollen from the compression and the two legs hung limply from her, growing cold in the February air. That couldn't be good, I thought to myself, closing my eyes and shaking my head. My eyes flew open when one of the legs kicked in response to Nyla's next contraction beginning. Nyla was pushing in earnest, now, loud grunts and even screams coming from her half opened mouth. The legs slipped out to the shoulder, my hand falling out with them. The head popped out, covered in slime and the amniotic sac, the tongue blue and lolling out of the side of the mouth. "Towel!" I called again, and quickly wiped off the face of the baby as the terry cloth was placed in my hand. Nyla gathered herself and the rest of the baby slithered out, all long and lean and leggy, sliding through my hands to splash onto the floor of the barn. I scooped it up, wiping it down. On the dirt? That couldn't be healthy! I noticed as I quickly dried off the baby that the cord was broken--so much for the sterilized clamps and scissors. Nyla turned and

nuzzled the baby in my hands. The baby screamed, a loud piercing cry that was jarring to my dazed ears. I looked up at my audience, what now?

“Honey?” Tim spoke softly and smiled at me, “Do you think you should give the goat her baby?”

I stared at him. Oh. Yes. I held out the baby to Nyla, letting her sniff and lick him with short, fast strokes. I laid him down on the ground in front of her and watched as the baby struggled to its feet as Nyla snuffled all over it. “Do you think that is it?” Tim asked, “Might there be more?”

Horror and exhaustion struck me simultaneously. “There better *not* be!” I snapped, “I can’t do that again!”

The laughter of my daughters drew my attention as they pointed to Nyla--and the second baby struggling to its feet behind her. I staggered to my feet and looked down at the pair of kids falling on their faces in their uncoordinated attempts to rise to their feet. I looked at Nyla, absorbed in her babies. I looked at the human audience, all elated grins. I looked down at my coat, covered in goat amniotic fluid and slime and--yes--even the black, sticky, tar-like meconium. I addressed the onlookers, I addressed Nyla, I addressed God.

“Never again. People are SO much easier. Never. Again.”

The next morning I sat and cradled the smaller of the two bucklings in my lap. The larger one was asleep at my feet in a Rubbermaid tote filled with shavings. I had milked Nyla that morning, amazed when the yellow colostrum from her teats filled the milk pail. Stream after stream came hot and steady from the orifice until the pail was full of foamy goodness. I brought it into the kitchen, straining it into quart-sized canning jars. I capped the jars, and looked at them

in amazement. This was not yet milk that we could drink, but it was close. We had done it. We had moved to the country, bought animals and now, had milked them. In the weeks to come, I would pour Nyla's sweet creamy milk into my coffee and over my children's cereal. We had done it. We had transitioned to a new world. New to us, yet ancient. I was enthralled.

Nyla's kidding was just one in a series of transformational experiences. For many, the move from city living to the country is a matter of following their values and their beliefs. For us, it was more a matter of practicality. We wanted to instill responsibility in our children and felt that chores such as caring for animals and garden would be a means towards that end. The heart and soul of our family was our children, and building good character in them was our calling.

What we never expected was that the land would forever change our own character.

We moved to the country with a simple proposition, country living as one more child training tool. We were also fueled by a growing desire for freedom and a vague longing for something that caught us by surprise--roots. Both Tim and I had grown up in families that moved frequently. We lacked extended family. We had aunts, uncles, cousins, who were rarely seen and barely known. When we married, neither of us knew how to put down roots, in fact we were sceptical of their value and yet the vague longing remained. We bought a house in the city, declaring this to be our roots. We felt that the roots were truly the family, the house was simply where we planted.

In the city we considered issues such as property value, what others deemed our home to be worth. We busied ourselves with time and home management, organizing and setting up

systems designed to make us more efficient. The home was a tool, a means to an end. We had a job to do and the house was a malleable aspect of that job.

We expected the same from the country. We were mistaken.

In the city we owned a house.

In the country, the land owns you.

The land remakes you as surely as childbirth remakes a woman. It leaves permanent changes in your body. Stretch-marks and scars remain forever. Years after that baby has moved beyond your breast, the actual physical structure of that breast is changed. Years after that baby has moved out of your arms, your arms retain the memory of that weight, lighter than you expected and your heart retains the memory of the weight of responsibility, heavier than you ever imagined. After giving birth you find your perspective forever changed. You no longer think in terms of the here and now, you think in terms of eternity. You quickly learn that although you may claim the child yours, this is more a matter of having deeded your heart to another, rather than being able to claim deed to them.

We moved to land that had, in many ways, been treated as a disposable commodity. It looked beautiful but barely beneath the surface we found the debris of a society that creates comforts and interests with no plans for disposal. Cleaning up has been a slow excavation. It has caused us to look deeply at our city habits of consumption. In the city it was as simple as dividing trash into "recyclable" or not. In the country even the recyclable carries weight, for there is no convenient bin provided to place out each week with the trash. Every can of tomato sauce is a liability. We can pay someone to haul it away for us. We can set it aside for a later hour-long drive to a recycling facility. We can find some corner of the property and bury it.

Regardless, as the thousands of broken bottles and cans that we have dug up testifies, that metal can will remain. Concepts such as sustainability and the environment do not remain simple concepts when looking past a can of food to the ten acres of woods. With every decision we assume stewardship. We are being allowed the precious gift of participating in the act of redemption.

This redemption has become the shaping force of our lives. We are redeeming land that was not only not productive, but was also abused. This house has only been on the land for forty years and yet the clean-up looks like it will take forever. At the same time as we are engaged in the work of redemption, we are demanding to be allowed to partake of the gift of creating life. We desperately desire to see this land productive. We want to see it provide for not only our family, but for our animals and through our animals, for other families as well. This balancing of redemption and production is a merciless dictator. Like a freight train gathering steam, as the farm gains in productivity the work multiplies. We run faster and faster in order to not fall behind--or be run over. Fall behind and something dies, or does not reach its full potential and failure screams from every corner.

But every so often, it happens. The conjoined acts of redemption and creation become one, and we realize that it has become a dance. We are working and moving in unison with a living breathing part of creation and it is humbling to be able to partake. We realize that it is not simply the land that is being redeemed and brought to fruitfulness, the land itself is doing that same work in us. We are putting down roots that are more than metaphoric in nature. We are being grounded in work that has eternal value. We were created to transform this part of creation and be transformed by the labor of doing so.

