

'Greedy for Goats' is the autobiography of the first ten years or so that Edith Speers spent as a goat breeder. The lengthy manuscript is divided into short chapters, many of which can stand alone as individual stories and essays.

Ignorance

I will tell you a little bit about how ignorant we were when we first went on the land. To tell it all would take too much telling, because we were very ignorant.

When we first pitched our little orange canvas tent under the wattle trees on the slope above the creek, in January 1976, there was me and Ron and Ron's four year old son, Jason. I was from Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Ron and Jason were from Sydney, NSW, Australia. Ron and I lived together, and Jason was with us just for the summer. This became our pattern for the next several years. Ron and I lived together and worked on our property and also worked at money-paying jobs. Jason would come and spend the Christmas holidays with us then go back to his mother in Sydney in late January or so. This was our first summer together, the summer that Ron and I bought thirty acres of rural land in southern Tasmania.

The first ignorant thing we did was buy the land. We didn't even turn over a shovelful of ground to see how it was. We didn't even check out weather records to see what the climate was like down here. We had only looked at two other properties. We never thought of how much money it would take to develop the place, to fence it, to do the thousand and one things that anyone born in the country knows will need to be done. Most dangerous and ignorant of all, we knew nothing of the local people and never thought to wonder whether we could adapt to them or they to us or whether we could find friends here. I guess neither of us had ever thought of ourselves in terms of fitting into a community. We were townies. We had never even been on speaking terms with neighbours, let alone having to go to them for help, for work, for information, for rental of equipment, for sorting out boundaries, and all the thousand and one things you have to do with neighbours in the country .

The next ignorant thing we did was to wade through tall reeds and bracken fern and gone-to-seed grass to get to the creek for our water. Ron hacked out a track with the machete, but it was still risky - this place was ideal snake territory and all Tasmanian snakes are poisonous. However, ignorant as it was, it did me a favour. I got the habit of not worrying about snakes and I still don't worry about them. This really bothers people, so I pretend to worry just to keep them happy.

Another ignorant thing I did, and I am still prone to it, was make a big fuss over a pencil-thin wattle sapling. I wouldn't let Ron chop it down to make room for our tent. I made him move the tent to another place. Eventually, like within six months, that tree got ploughed under when we hired an old bloke to prepare some garden ground for us. I've sacrificed many a tree since then, most of them not too reluctantly. But back then, I was fresh from the city, and I'd lived in cities most of my life, where only the lucky and the wealthy could have a tree on their property. Where only the lucky and the wealthy had property, full stop.

To this day, having property and having trees on it makes me feel both lucky and wealthy. But I've also learned to have more faith in the bush. It is stronger than us. It will endure. Around here, you've only got to ignore a bit of ground for a little while and the bush will rise up. It will sprout up all around you with frondy wattles and prickly teatree and festoons of wild clematis and with a hundred anonymous waxy-barked and leathery-leafed trees, trees that may get no thicker than a hoe handle but will crowd together like matchsticks in a matchbox, their dense branches interweaving beneath the canopy of taller wattle growth and towering gum trees.

This is the bush. I have built my home in the middle of it, and I beat it back from the walls of my house

with a combination of fire, tillage, brush-cutter, chainsaw, and hungry herd of goats. I beat it back away from the walls of my house, far enough back to provide a bit of safety, just a bit, from bushfire, and definitely far enough back to let the sun pour down on my roof and into my windows both summer and winter. But not too far back. Not as far back as the boundary fences. Never that far back.

I am still very ignorant about a great many things - such as the bush itself where only a few years ago I learned to tell a banksia from a grevillia. Acacias and eucalypts are pretty obvious. But at least I know a bit better where it is that I am ignorant. Back in the beginning we were so ignorant that we didn't even know we were ignorant. And that is truly the condition in which ignorance is bliss. It is the awakening from ignorance that is painful, frightening, and wonderful.

A Brief Lesson in Politics

It was the middle of May when I drove up to New Norfolk with Meg and Linda to have them mated to a registered buck. Linda was served on that first visit and returned home with me the next day but it was the end of May when I went back to fetch Meg home. So Linda had two weeks in which to revel in Meg's absence.

Now, it's an interesting illustration of goat psychology that although Meg was the boss of the herd, she was not the leader. Linda was the leader.

Meg was the bully, feared by all and challenged only by the reckless and obstinate Jasmine. Being a mere 7-months kid, Jasmine may have had the temperament but she certainly did not have the bulk to seriously interfere with Meg's tyranny. Meg pushed everyone out of her way. She grabbed more than her fair share of hay and treats. She was the only goat with private accommodation. While Linda and the three kids huddled in the damp hollow over which we'd propped a lean-to roof and which, in our innocence, we referred to as 'the goat shelter', Meg tucked herself neatly high and dry in the old turned-on-its-side water tank up the hill under the laburnum tree.

But for those two weeks at the end of May while Meg was gone, Linda moved into the water tank and became the boss of the herd. I was shocked.

Meg was a bully, but hers was a blunt bad-tempered bullying. It was simply her moodiness, it seemed, that made her so aggressive. But Linda was actively and consciously wicked. And she enjoyed every minute of it.

I could understand Linda's greed. It was natural that she, in the position of power thanks to superior size and experience, should grab more than her fair share of hay and treats. It was even quite sensible that she should grab the best accommodation. I was even willing to grant her the right to such greed, because she was now pregnant and taking care of two - or more - rather than just herself. But Linda was a biter. She bit the kids' ears. And when she trapped a kid's ear between the teeth of her lower jaw and the hard pad of her upper jaw, she crunched down and twisted and she wouldn't let go. Her eyes gleamed wickedly and she shook that poor kid the way a terrier shakes a rat.

"Linda!" I cried in shock and horror. "Linda, let go! Stop that!" Distracted by my shrieking, she let go. But I never fooled myself that she was obedient. Or contrite. She swivelled her long velvet ears in my direction and bestowed upon me a mild puzzled glance. Her face had the look of wearing a benevolent smile, a vaguely gentle and mysterious smile, her Mona Lisa smile.

It really bothered me that gentle Linda, poor Linda who was always getting shoved around by Meg, should now be showing even worse viciousness than her tormentor. Anyone who crossed Meg's path would get a thump in the guts and that would be that. It was nothing personal. Meg's strength was sufficient to establish her authority.

But Linda was a real bone-rack. Where Meg was built like a beer barrel, on short muscular legs, Linda was gangly and slab-sided. Linda's conformation, by the way, was what is considered desirable in a dairy goat. She was fairly narrow through the ribcage but deep in the gut. She carried not a spare ounce—or gram—of flesh, and never did, no matter how ample the feed. Having reached her adult size, she thereafter converted everything she ate into milk or, if she were pregnant, into kids.

Anyway, not having physical strength or even much courage, Linda used cruelty and cunning. It was the first time that this fact of life, not unknown among humans, was ever brought to my attention in the realm of goats. I didn't like it. I also, in my sentimental human way, didn't like seeing this nasty side of a goat whose character I thought I had adequately stereotyped.

It was also the first time that this fact of life, the failure of stereotypes, was likewise brought to my attention. It disturbed me. I was just getting a glimmer that something was amiss in my judgement of human beings, and now my goats had to underline the source of my unease. I was in for a lot more of this kind of disturbance as I tried to stereotype my new neighbours, these country people of Tasmania, and the stereotypes failed. Sometimes I thought a person must be good because of this, that, or the other - and I was proved wrong. Sometimes I thought a person must be bad because of this, that, or the other. And I was proved wrong. Usually we think people are good if they do what we want and agree with what we say, and we think they are bad if they do the reverse. But, strangely enough, we can be quite quite wrong.

In this case, I thought it was better to bash someone in the guts, head-first, than to sneak up from behind and bite their ears. I still think it's better, but I'm willing to concede that this is merely my opinion and my personal preference with regard to style, rather than anything that should be carved on stone tablets and set up in a temple.

Having observed Linda's style of bullying for two weeks, I was glad when the day finally came that I could fetch Meg from New Norfolk and restore her to my backyard, and to her rightful place in the herd.

I will confess to a certain wicked gleefulness of my own as I led Meg from the van and up the yard toward the gate. I was watching for Linda's reaction. As soon as the kids caught sight of Meg, they nickered - and she nickered in reply. Linda said not a word.

While I was putting Meg into the yard and closing the gate, the three kids came ambling down the hill to have a sniff. Linda made not a move.

The young goats sniffed at the face and under the tail of their old tyrant. Jasmine and Meg laid their ears back flat against their skulls and pressed foreheads together. They both pushed gently. Then they both backed off, reared up and came down again, knocking their heads lightly together. Meg bleated gruffly. The other two kids, Rosie and Apple, also paid their respects.

Linda watched all this with great alertness. Finally she walked down the hill to get a closer look, to get close enough for a sniff, just to make sure.

“Yes, she's back,” I said. “It's her, alright.”

You might think it's queer that I talk to goats. I think it's a lot queerer not to talk to them.

You also might think I'm being merely imaginative when I say that Linda peered into my face and saw my look of satisfied smugness and gave me a very shrewd and dirty look in return. But then, you probably haven't had much experience with goats.

Meg, seeing Linda, took a step forward and stretched out her neck.

Linda also stretched out her neck, and they touched nose to nose and both sniffed. Satisfied with the identification, Meg flattened back her ears and tucked in her chin, presenting her rock-hard forehead as she took a quick step forward. Linda bleated pathetically and jumped away.

Things were back to normal.