

I Tried to Talk to God

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I tried to talk to God once, but it didn't work. It happened a long time ago, so maybe I should try again, give Him another chance. But I'm pretty worn out now, and don't know if I have the will any more.

I was young then and life was looking pretty good. Me and Bea got married and had the baby and she was a doll, the joy of our lives. We couldn't have asked for anything more, and we didn't. Sara had a bit of colic at first and that made the nights hard. And I still had to get up before dawn to drive the truck to collect the milk from the neighboring farms. When I got back to the plant Cory would take care of the hoses after I helped him set them up, and then I would go in and put on the hairnet and the white gown and the rubber boots and start working on the vats. We made cheese seven days a week, since the goats don't know the difference between Sunday and any other day and the debt Bea's Ma and Pa took on to refurbish the plant wouldn't go away by itself.

Still, I didn't mind. Even when it was cold and I couldn't see the old men standing by the side of the gray slip of asphalt until I had driven out of the fog on winter mornings and the headlights caught the silver canisters lined up by the side of the road. I'd get out of the truck and help them hoist the canisters and dump them in the tank on the back of the truck and the aluminum would practically stick to my hands. The old men always offered me cigarettes while they complained about the fences that were going up and how they couldn't herd wherever they liked to any more, how everything was being cut off and there was no future in tending goats any more. And like everyone else they

cussed and shat on God and I didn't pay any attention to that, it was just the way people talk, saying "Me cago en Dios" when what they mean is something else.

After about three months Sara settled down a bit, enough for Bea to consider coming back to work, even though the baby was still sucking on her tit. But her Ma told her she should take it easy, we could manage without her, and a little baby girl's only got one mother and one childhood and before you know it it's all over. We all agreed on that and nobody was bothered by pulling a little more weight in the plant, since it's a family business and business was good and the interest on the big debt was getting paid regular. But we couldn't have imagined how true it was, what Bea's Ma said.

Still everything was just fine, there was only the tiredness that would pull on my bones, but young as I was then I could shift it off pretty easy. I especially liked coming home after we finished at night and settling down with the TV and the baby asleep in Bea's arms, the three of us slouching together on the sofa. Sometimes we would stay up late, Bea and me, before taking Sara into the bed, and watch whatever was on. My own family was all broken up, with one brother up in Barcelona and another away in Madrid, and my Ma long gone and my Pa spending his days playing cards in the old folks home and drinking *pitarra* with his buddies. Once the cancer took Ma I wanted to get out on my own as soon as I could, not that my old man was cruel or anything like that, it's just that living alone with him wasn't the same, but instead I stayed on. When I heard about the job at the plant though—and this was before they refurbished the place with that small business loan—it sounded better than working the tobacco, so I applied and they took me in. I was the only one that wasn't a Perera but they treated me like family all the

same and that was just fine. And as soon as I laid eyes on Bea I knew what I wanted from her.

It was a long time though before I could know what she was really thinking. We worked side by side every day and she was always good humored and kind, but she was like that with everybody, it was just her nature, the way she was. We all worked together stirring the milk and then setting it in the molds and stacking these and cleaning up and scrubbing and hosing everything down after we were done, making the stainless steel shine. Before they refurbished the place customers could walk into a cubby hole where a cash register sat on the counter and Bea was the one who always left us and tended to them. I could see her through the glass partition just like the customers could see me in there dressed all in white, doing a job that was usually done by women, and when I saw Bea smile at men who'd been sent by their wives to buy some cheese and chat longer than I thought necessary my insides would roll over.

I knew I didn't have much of anything to offer Bea. I was still living at home though I was putting away my savings and they were growing little by little, but I knew that a woman wants a hell of a lot more than some money in the bank, more maybe than any man can ever give her. So I was kind of surprised when Cory started teasing me when we were alone, hooking up the hoses to the truck, saying how pretty his sister was now that she was almost nineteen and fully flourished and how if somebody fancied her they'd better not dilly dally about because first come first serve was the golden rule in everybody's book. I never paid much attention to him, didn't even answer what he said, just kept my head down and did my business, put my net cap and white gown and rubber

boots on and went in there to stand right beside Bea and wonder again what she might be thinking.

Then that spring came and the days started getting longer and once, after work, I asked her if she wanted to come with me to look for some wild asparagus now that the time was right and she said yes, just like that. I had been working so hard to build up the courage to ask her and I was so sure she wouldn't want to come that before she could answer me I said, "Well, maybe some other time," since I had planned that too, just in case.

"Some other time what?" she said.

"Well, if you're busy now, got something else to do..."

She smiled and her eyes grew even brighter and her mouth was so clean and pretty I couldn't even think what to do next but she took over, like a woman'll do when a man gets stuck, and she started walking down the road to the hills on the south side of the village where the asparagus grows along the edge of that wood.

After that it was easy and this thing between us grew bigger and stronger like it was always meant to be. We found time, after work, to be alone and nobody seemed to mind. I was still just the hired help but even Bea's Pa started treating me special, taking over the hosing down on a Saturday night so that I could leave a little earlier and get fixed up to spend some time with his only daughter. Cory kept teasing me, but what he said was different, something like, "Ever wonder why it is that a nanny only drops one or two kids, but when a bitch has pups she births more than she can feed?"

I never could control the way the fire would flare into my cheeks. Cory'd start laughing and slapping his thigh and saying, "I knew it. I knew it. I'm gonna be a Uncle Cory!"

But Bea and me were real respectful with each other, even though it's not like that anymore, and no matter how much I might have wanted to finally find out what it was all about I kept waiting until we got married. I think Bea appreciated that, because she said it made her feel sacred. I thought it was a funny word to use but she said, "Don't you believe there's something that shouldn't be violated, ever, no matter what?"

"Like what?"

"Like trusting somebody. And making sure they can trust you."

"Who are you talking about? I never told any lies."

She looked away from me then and those bright eyes of hers dimmed and she said, "It's not only what we say, but what we do."

That made me think some, even though I wasn't sure what she meant. But the night of our wedding she was trembling when she flicked off the lights and slipped into bed beside me. It was September and the nights had started to chill so I thought it was the cold and I said, "You want a blanket?"

"Come," was all she said, "and warm me now."

Within a year Sara was born. I looked forward to becoming a dad the whole time while Bea's belly got bigger and bigger. She was even more beautiful, all filled out now. But I got to admit I didn't know what to expect by the end of the nine months. She went into labor at midnight and it was the morning after the next day that Sara came out. And all that time Bea kept moaning and there was nothing I could do about it and I couldn't sit

still either. The goats never made noises like she did so I figured something was wrong. Finally I got so scared that I tried to talk to God for the first time and I told Him what anybody would say under the circumstances, that I'd do whatever He wanted me to do just so long as Bea came through with the baby and everything was alright. And that's exactly what happened, though I forgot all about that promise once Sara was born and she was bundled up safe and sound in my arms.

At first I was a little uneasy about holding her much but then I got used to how small and light and squirmy she was and I knew I wouldn't hurt her. My Pa never touched a diaper in his life, but his world wasn't my world and I liked taking care of my little girl, cupping her head in the palm of my hand while she thrashed about with her skinny arms and legs in the plastic tub we used for a bath. Her tiny wrinkled hands stayed all curled up for such a long time, months it was, before they started to unfold, little by little, just like a bud'll do when it flowers. At first Sara wouldn't look directly at any of us and it made me fear she might be blind, though her eyes had plenty of light in them and whenever she heard us call her name she always rolled her head and looked all around, like she was just trying to find out where that invisible voice came from.

Once I was giving her a bath and she slipped out of my hand and rolled over and swallowed a bunch of water. I jerked her out of the bath with one hand while I groped around for the towel with the other but she was squalling so loud Bea came running into the bathroom and started screaming at me like it was my fault. That's when I remembered my promise to God and later, when the baby was calm again and lying on her back and staring up at nothing, I thought weren't we just like her when it came to

God, weren't we looking around everywhere and trying to see Him even though we couldn't when we thought we heard Him calling to us?

But I was never religious in any way, my Pa hated the church and everything it had done, "always siding with the boss man," he said, and I knew it was true and I thought I hated the church too. But Bea was raised different and she said, "What, you think God and a building made out of old stones are the same thing? Even God and the priest, who just pretends to be on such good terms with Him, they're not the same."

I hadn't ever thought of it like that but I had to admit that Bea had a point. She was a smart girl and I was proud to have her for my wife. Sometimes, under my breath, I would even thank God for that, that Bea had chosen me just like I chose her. It could have worked out any other way and I knew how lucky I was that it worked out the way it did.

So life went on like that and everything was just fine. When Sara was seven months old we bought a brand new car, putting down most of the money I had saved while waiting to get married. It was a Renault and it was blue and it smelled good and baby Sara loved to ride in the special seat we had for her in the back. She was a happy girl and slept the nights through now and that made life so much more pleasant that Bea started talking about having another one, maybe a little brother for Sara to sister to. I thought it was a good idea too, but there wasn't any hurry and we didn't want to pile 'em up too close. Bea's Ma said with a year and a half between 'em that's about right, since it was just a year and a half that separated Cory from his sister.

He was a great uncle too, I got to admit, I never seen a young man who loved to play with a little baby girl like that, just talking rubbish to her all the time, anything to get

a smile out of his niece. He'd even take her off with him all by himself, pushing her through the cobblestone streets of the village, and people said he looked so proud it could've been his own daughter he was banging about in the buggy. I always wondered why he didn't settle on one of the gals he would take to the movies down in Naval moral, forty kilometers away, and set up his own home life. But whenever I mentioned this he just looked at me like he couldn't figure me out and said, "What's the hurry?"

"First come first serve," I said, just to remind him.

"I'll know her when I see her," was all he said to that, and I figured he must be right, since that's the way it had been with Bea and me.

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Even though we prepared for a great big celebration Sara came down with a fever on her first birthday, so the party wasn't much fun. It was hot and dry and we had thought about going to the creek for a swim, but instead Bea spent the afternoon fanning the baby in the coolest room in the house. The fever lasted for a few days and all the village women who came in to buy cheese said the same thing, that Sara was just growing, because that's what a fever that didn't have any other cause meant, that the child was hurting from the stretching of her bones. "Growing pains," was what they called it. By then Sara was already taking a few steps and Cory would spend hours with her, taking her hand in his fist and leading her around the patio out back. The house was a Perera house, and it was right next door to the cheese plant and Bea would walk out onto the patio before lunch and look for me and I would see 'em both as soon as I came out the door and I would wave to them, but I couldn't know then how precious that really was then.

It was just a month after Sara's birthday and she was starting to walk with a surer step when she started falling down. We didn't think much of it at first, we thought she was just learning, but the way she would cry it wasn't only frustration. She started spitting out her food too, when she'd always been such a good eater, and just sat in her highchair and howled. Bea's Ma told us she would pay for a visit to the doctor in Navalmoral since there wasn't anyone in the village and Cory pulled for me and I drove Bea and Sara to see him one afternoon. He didn't like the yellow in Sara's eyes and he didn't hide it much either. He said, "I think you ought to take her to the hospital, to see what they can make of it." We didn't ask him any of the questions that started rushing into our heads. I just paid him and thanked him for his time, and we left as soon as we could gather our gear. It was about a ten minute drive to the hospital and Sara was mostly whimpering all the time and the blood had drained out of her face and I could tell that Bea was starting to get pretty worried, so I decided that I would stay cool. But when I couldn't find a parking space and Sara wouldn't stop moaning I lost my temper and started shouting at the driver in the car in front of me. I didn't even hear what he said to me, something inside just clicked, and all I saw was black and I leaped out the car and ran up to his window and as soon as he had rolled it down to curse me I stuck my hands through and tried to drag him out of his seat by the throat. He was an older man with a thick neck and a tobacco-stained moustache and his wife was hitting at my hands with a purse when one of the security guards came up and grabbed me from behind. I knew I'd been a fool, but I just shook that bastard off of me and when he started going for the stick I said, "You pull that thing out you better make damn sure you know how to use it."

As soon as I got back in the car Bea screamed, “That doesn’t help any! That doesn’t help at all!” And I turned on her and told her to shut up. Then I floored it and swerved around the security guard who was leaning into the other car and I finally found a space that wasn’t legal but I didn’t give a damn. It was like storm clouds pushing in from the west, something dark and mean sweeping across my mind. Bea took the baby out of her seat and I muttered that I was sorry, but she didn’t care about me. So I trailed after her like a dog and followed her through the emergency doors.

As soon as the doctor on duty saw Sara he started telling us what to do and he sent me over to the admissions window to take care of the paperwork while he led Bea, who was clinging to the baby, into an examination room. I couldn’t think straight and kept messing up the forms and having to start all over again. My hand was shaking so bad the letters couldn’t be read, but I finally got it done and pushed the form through the little window and after a while the woman gave me a couple of hospital passes that I stuck in my shirt pocket, then I turned around and started looking for my family.

By the time I found Bea and Sara they were both sobbing and I couldn’t understand what Bea was saying. Something about an ambulance, and having to go to Madrid, and she would ride with the baby, while I followed in the car. Everything was happening way too fast and I wanted to grab Bea and hold her still long enough to make the world stop spinning, but I knew it was impossible. Instead I listened to more orders and just like a goat that’s been stunned before it’s stuck, I walked out to the car and got in and pulled it around to the emergency entrance and waited for the ambulance to start up.

It was during that two hour drive to Madrid that I really started trying to talk to God, even pleading with Him. I told Him I didn’t understand what was happening, and

asked Him could He please explain it all to me? I asked Him, why Sara, why did it have to be *my* baby girl? I told him she'd been fine, everything had been just fine, and she was just starting to walk now too. Why did He want to take that away from her? Was that fair? I told him I would be brave and do anything He wanted me to do, but just as soon as I said that I remembered it was the same thing I said when Sara was born. So I said I was sorry for breaking my promise, I didn't mean to, and I asked Him if there was something else I should have done and didn't do too. "Is that it?" I demanded. "Is that it?" Because if it was, I didn't know what it was that I should have done that I didn't do, I couldn't figure that out, what it might have been. So I tried to think real hard and I went over everything that had happened during the last year, but everything had been fine, me and Bea got along just fine, and Sara was growing up good and she was always such a sweet girl, so why did she have to suffer now? If only God could tell me what it was that I should have done then maybe we could make some sort of deal, maybe I could fix my ways and save Sara from the consequences. Maybe everything would be alright again. Maybe, just maybe.

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