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In another time and another place, the getting of meat was cause for celebration. In Texas last summer, getting together was cause for the getting of meat. Through a happy coincidence, a group of us who were raised together in Hereford happened to be back there at the same time. There was a twenty-fifth class reunion of the high school. There was the "wetting-down" of a naval commander who happened to be from that sea of grass. There was a cookbook to be researched. For these and other reasons, an inordinate number of survivors of the fifties in a Panhandle town met and agreed to kill the fatted calf, or milk-fed goat as it were.

We decided to have a barbecue. After all, I had this recipe for Cabrito Al Pastor to try out. We all wanted to see each other. Everyone could bring something. We could, for a moment, recapture a piece of our shared history-the covered-dish supper. Here's how it went.

I hadn't been home 20 minutes before my friend from the cradle, John Gililand, stopped by. John always knows when I get home-even if nobody tells him. Part, of the reason is that his parents' house and business is one block from my mother's house. Part of it is ESP.

Are we going to test recipes? John asked. You bet your boots, I answered. How'd you like to cook a goat outdoors? Great, he answered. Like his father and grandfather before him, John is the local mortician. He is by turns either swamped with work or idle, depending on whether he "has a body." Fortunately for the recipe testing, John was not busy when I got there. He had gone down to Close's Drug Store to drink an interminable cup of coffee when he ran into Wes Gulley, the district judge and an old South Texas ranch boy. He told Wes our plans, and Wes said he'd help. Wes has dressed out a lot of deer. Good. Now along comes another old boy in town for the class reunion, Jabe Wills, an underwater rescue teacher who lives in Southern California, wearing one of those big waterproof watches still set on California time. He'll help, too. So these three crowd into a telephone booth and call around. They find a goat.

John and Jabe pick me up. Judge goes back to court. The three of us head for the country. John's brought along Tecate, and he shows me how to hold the lemon in the crook of my hand, put the salt on top of the can, mix, and drink. We head for the house of the fellow with goats. His name is Pasqual Delgado, and he said he lives in the big house on the south side of the draw. We can tell we are getting close when we spot the big herd of goats.

On the way out John says he had asked Pasqual how big his goats were, and Pasqual had answered, thirty dollars. John sighs. Anything for research.

Here we are at Delgado's. Flat plain as far as you can see; barbed wire, a lean-to with shoats and a sow, little garden, water hose going, and everywhere children in white, barefoot and

twirling on the dusty road, flapping their wings, playing a game and smiling.

We shake hands all around. And where is the goat? Delgado gives an expansive wave of the arm. Alla. We give over our thirty dollars and we all head for the herd of goats. We leave the rope in the truck. I have on walking shorts and Birkenstocks. Jabe has on Adidas. John has thought to bring along his mortician's apron. He knows how to keep stuff off his clothes.

Over a plowed field. Heat shimmering, step up, step down, step up, step down. Knock the sand out of your shoe. Pick the sticker out of your toe.

Don't touch the fence-it's hot. Okay. Over the single strand of wire-gingerly. And now we see the goats maybe two hundred of them.

Delgado speaks. You can have your choice. He has one goat that he hadn't thought he'd sell because it is "castrate," but maybe-for forty dollars-he will let it go. No, we say firmly. We'll take the thirty-dollar goat. Delgado's nine-year-old girl is barefoot among all these clods and stickers. He motions to her, then waves his arm in our direction, and we begin to move in on the black kid that he has pointed out. The goats trot along, tense and wary but not really worried. Delgado wants them to go through this trap that leads to the shed, but the lead goat is too smart for him and always veers just at the last moment. By now they are milling around; we are fanned out in a semicircle. We have trotted and run some ourselves, hearts pounding and pumping. This time we get them headed right for the trap. I'm positioned just past the gate to scare them from fading in the stretch, but wily old Billy takes one glance at me with that human-looking yellow eye of his, ducks his head, and runs right past me. They all sweep by, and I am scared to death they'll step on my bare toes. Run, you suckers, I holler, and take off after them. It's hell to be a goat roper with no rope.

This sort of milling and trotting goes on until we are all heaving and blowing. Then the lead goat gets real smart and finds a hole in Delgado's fence and leads the entire herd into a pasture holding seven cows and a range bull. Delgado shouts and we all follow. We chase the goats up into these cows who also begin to trot; at one point I see the bull just brush past me. At last Delgado speaks to his nine-year-old. She lunges under one old cow and grabs out chosen goat by the hind foot. Goat obliges her by kicking her right in the teeth. No worry, says Delgado, as he hands us the goat. Back at the truck, we tie up the black kid, throw her in the back, and head for the vet's. Good God, get out the beer.

Need I tell you that the vet says that we were all very cruel to run the poor animal down. We put her in a pen for a few hours so that she will be composed for her last moments.

John and Jabe and I drive around Hereford for a couple of hours in this pickup, drinking Tecate, looking at the rows of elm trees the founding fathers put here to break up the treeless landscape.

We are forever shoeing flies. Feed lots ring the town now, and the air is perfumed with the smell of cow manure and the air is polka-dotted with flies. It's been a long time since we dragged Main.

Just as the burning sun is about to drop-there is a vapor trail and a bank of clouds in the west all shimmering and magenta, I'd forgotten what a real sunset looks like-we all gather back at the office of the large-animal veterinarian.

The judge is here now, wearing his three-hundred-dollar, some rare-kind-of-creature boots and good pants and volunteering to dress the goat.

After we bleed the goat, the judge steps up and pulls out his little two-inch, razor-sharp silver penknife; and with his well manicured lawyer's hands he begins to skin and gut the goat. He has the mild manner of a man sure of his power. He never spills a drop of blood on himself. He never gets hair on the meat. He never says a word. It strikes me as funny that the vet and the mortician are hanging back while the lawyer does the job. Standing there holding the offal bag, I am having trouble refraining from laughter. I can see that this is a serious moment, however; so I keep a straight face.

Now John and I take the goat back to his house. In the backyard we hose it down for a good half hour to cool the meat. John's wife, Amy, coordinates everything. She goes to the funeral home for folding chairs. She makes suggestions to the twenty invited guests, and pretty soon the menu looks complete. We have calf fries coming, and hot cowboy beans, and corn bread, and even a champagne mousse made by the most popular cheerleader from my high school class.

Just as John and I are wrapping the goat in white paper to put it in the refrigerator, his daughter Suzy interrupts, insistent. Day after tomorrow she'll be sixteen, and she wants permission to drive a carload of friends to Amarillo. My God, girl, John says. I just killed a goat. What else do you want? That should be a birthday party fit for a princess. She searches his face. Is he serious? She wavers between laughing and crying.

The next morning John calls me to come over to the funeral home. I arrive, marveling at the overwhelming aroma of roses. John straightens up from an ancient ledger in which he is entering figures with an Esterbrook pen. He hands me a long grocery list. He will be done with the books by noon, he says, and will go home to build the fire.

John and I have both seen goats cooked outdoors, on a stake. We know how it's supposed to be done. About two o'clock he and I talk it over. He pokes around his workshed and comes up with a 5-foot steel stake that we ram through the goat, placing sticks between the forelegs and between the hind legs, breaking open the breastbone with an ax so that the carcass lays nice and flat the way you see them in the Mexican markets. We rub the kid down with salt, finely milled black pepper, and crushed cloves of garlic. We lard it lightly. The meat is so fresh and young that it is completely odorless. It is a lovely pale veal color.

Now we hit a problem. We can't build a fire in John's backyard and ruin the carefully nurtured grass. Then Jabe comes along with a solution. His father, an avid fisherman, had a blacksmith build him this strange steel contraption that looks like a big black fruit box on legs and stands about waist-high. As best we can tell he'd fill this thing with water, and clean all the mountain trout he'd caught near Pagosa Springs in it. Jabe and John use it to cool beer and have named

it the Doctor Wills Memorial-Fish Cleaner-and-Beer-Cooler. It must weigh two hundred pounds. Anyway, we clean it out, put a little sand on the bottom, make a good fire of mesquite and oak, throwing in some charcoal for good measure. We let the fire burn down, lay the staked goat a good 8 inches over the hot coals, and begin. We turn the meat every 30 minutes, holding on to the rod-kind of a giant shish kebab. We make a foil tent over the top to encourage smoke and to discourage the ubiquitous flies. When we notice that the thin ribs are beginning to char, we make little foil booties for them. At the end of 2 hours, we take it off. We know it is done because when we press the flesh, it gives nicely. Now it is a splendid glistening caramel color. It smells so good you could faint.

Soon the guests arrive, each bearing a platter of food. John is cooking calf fries on the Coleman stove. Amy has to run for more card tables to hold it all. Our own children are here, mostly strangers to each other, bouncing on the trampoline, their strong young bodies glistening in the twilight. They eye each other warily. Most of us have children as old as we all were when we were together last. I look around. The failing light is merciful. None of us looks any different than we did at sixteen.

Our parents are here, too, seeming smaller and less powerful than I can imagine. We queue up, pile our plates high with food, and sit down on the funeral home chairs to eat. Every bite of food tastes better than the last. There is as little talking as there used to be around a chuck wagon. We were all raised in cattle country and we knew the rules: eat first, talk later.

After the meal, when miraculously all the food is gone, we sit back in the dry night air and talk of many things. Someone says, did we know our favorite high school teacher just died. The vet's wife announces that she has accepted an appointment at eight o'clock the next morning for Aaron to remove the stink glands from a litter of baby skunks. Aaron turns red in the face and tells her she can do it herself. He's not taking any more damned skunks. Another man bemoans the gas mileage of his vintage T-bird.

If only our friend Barbara were here, we say. We discuss the bed length of the new Ford van and how it ruins the ride.

We talk some more about the food. How we would do this or that differently, but how it sure was good this way. The conversation is unimportant. In truth, we are practically strangers now. But the shared meal is what counts. It is getting late. The children, tired, bored, and not getting sufficient attention, begin to knock each other around. We know this is the signal to get on dishes. We are all reluctant to leave. Oh. There is one more thing. We'll wait until midnight, just five minutes away, and wish Suzy a happy birthday.

Amy digs around in the kitchen and comes up with a birthday candle. Jabe sticks it into a melting mousse. On the stroke of twelve, we burst into her room singing happy birthday.

She sits up almost before she can get her eyes open. She has been dead asleep. I am struck by the resemblance to John when he was just her age. I love this child that I scarcely know. I love her with the certainty of blood and tribe. We give her a kiss and retreat.

We quietly close the bedroom door and walk back to the den. The energy in the room has gone, like a puff of summer wind that blows open the curtains, washing over with a quick soft warmth, then retreats. There is nothing left to do. We begin loading into cars and go our separate ways.

Jabe, the motherless boy who, at twelve, got his own life back in the Hereford Municipal Swimming Pool after polio had withered a leg will go back to Southern California where he will teach underwater safety to divers. John, my very first friend, with whom I used to play in and around the caskets, sometimes getting up the nerve to poke the stone-hard cheek of a man laid out before the wake, will go back to the funeral home and take the place his father and his father before him held. Wes, the South Texas import, will go back to getting people in and out of jails and in and out of marriages. Aaron will go back to the office and face the litter of skunks his wife has arranged for him to deperfume. Suzy will go to Amarillo with her friends after all. I will go away to write this book.

But for a day, we have dropped our current lives. We have worked and cooked and eaten together. We have been - for a moment - a family again.