

## IT HAPPENS LIKE THIS –

by Charles Wuorinen on texts of James Tate

### It Happens Like This

I was outside St. Cecilia's Rectory smoking a cigarette when a goat appeared beside me. It was mostly black and white, with a little reddish brown here and there. When I started to walk away, it followed. I was amused and delighted, but wondered what the laws were on this kind of thing. There's a leash law for dogs, but what about goats? People smiled at me and admired the goat. "It's not my goat," I explained. "It's the town's goat. I'm just taking my turn caring for it." "I didn't know we had a goat," one of them said. "I wonder when my turn is." "Soon," I said. "Be patient. Your time is coming." The goat stayed by my side. It stopped when I stopped. It looked up at me and I stared into its eyes. I felt he knew everything essential about me. We walked on. A policeman on his beat looked us over. "That's a mighty fine goat you got there," he said, stopping to admire. "It's the town's goat," I said. "His family goes back three hundred years with us," I said, "from the beginning." The officer leaned forward to touch him, then stopped and looked up at me. "Mind if I pat him?" he asked. "Touching this goat will change your life," I said. "It's your decision." He thought real hard for a minute, and then stood up and said, "What's his name?" "He's called the Prince of Peace," I said. "God! This town is like a fairy tale. Everywhere you turn there's mystery and wonder. And I'm just a child playing cops and robbers forever. Please forgive me if I cry." "We forgive you, Officer," I said. "And we understand why you, more than anybody, should never touch the Prince." The goat and I walked on. It was getting dark and we were beginning to wonder where we would spend the night.

### The Rules

A man came into the store and said, "I'd like to have two steaks, about ten ounces each, a half-an-inch thick, please." I said, "Sir, this is a candy store. We don't have steaks." He said, "And I'd like to have two potatoes and a bunch of asparagus." I said, "I'm sorry, this is a candy store, sir. That's all we carry." He said, "I don't mind waiting." "It could be many years," I said. "I have plenty of time," he said. And, while he was waiting, a woman came in and said, "Where is your hat section? I'm hoping you have a large, red hat with a feather." "I'm awfully sorry, but this is a candy store," I said. "We don't carry hats." "I'd like to see it, nonetheless," she said. "It might just fit me." "We only carry candy," I said. "It might just fit me, anyway," she said. "If you'd like to wear a piece of candy on your head, I could possibly find something in red," I said. "That would be lovely," she said. And, then, another man came in and pulled out a gun. "Give me all your money," he said. I said, "I'm sorry, this is a candy store. We don't do hold ups." "But I have a gun," he said. "Yes, I can see that, sir, but it doesn't work in here. This is a candy store," I said. He looked at the man and woman standing in the corner. "What about them, can I hold them up?" he said. "Oh no, I'm afraid not. They're covered under the candy store protection plan, even though, technically, they don't know they're in a candy store," I said. "Well, at least I knew you were a candy store, I just didn't know there were all these special rules. Can I at least have some jellybeans? I'll pay you for them, don't worry," he said. As I was getting him his jellybeans, another man walked in with a gun. "This is a stickup," he said. "Give me all of your cash." The first thief said, "This is a candy store, you fool. They don't do stickups." "What do you mean, they don't do stickups?" the second thief said. "It's against the rules," the first one said. "I never read the rule book. I didn't even know there was one," the second one said. "Would you like some chocolate kisses, or perhaps some peanut brittle?" I said, hoping to avert a squabble. He replaced the gun into his shoulder holster and scanned the glass cases thoughtfully. "A half-a-dozen chocolate-covered cherries would make me a very happy man," he said. "That's what candy stores are for," I said. The two thieves left together, munching their candy and chatting about a mutual friend. And that's when Bonita Sennot and Halissa Delphin came in. Halissa was wearing a large, red hat with a feather in it. The woman in the corner leapt forward. "That's it! That's the very hat I want," she said, yanking the hat off Halissa's head. Halissa grabbed the lady's arm and threw her to the floor, retrieving her hat. Bonita ordered a bag of malted milk balls. The man in the corner helped the woman to her feet. "That's my hat," she whispered to him. "She's wearing my hat." Halissa invited me to have dinner with them. I said, "Great!"

## The Formal Invitation

I was invited to a formal dinner party given by Marguerite Famish Burrige and her husband, Kneim Oswald Lancelot Burrige. I had never met either of them, and had no idea why I was invited. When the butler announced me, Mrs. Burrige came up and greeted me quite graciously. "I'm so happy you could join us," she said. "I know Knelm is looking forward to talking to you later." "I can't wait," I said, "I mean, the pleasure's all mine." Nothing came out right. I wanted to escape right then, but Mrs. Burrige dragged me and introduced me to some of her friends. "This is Nicholas and Sondra Pepperdene. Nicholas is a spy," she said. "I am not," he said. "Yes, you are, darling. Everyone knows it," she said. "And Sondra does something with swans, I'm not sure what. She probably mates them, knowing Sondra." "Really! I'm saving them from extinction," Mrs. Pepperdene said. "And this is Mordecai Rhinelander, and, as you might guess from his name, he's a Nazi. And his wife, Dagmar, is a Nazi, too. Still, lovely people," she said. "Marguerite, you're giving our new friend a very bad impression," Mr. Rhinelander said. "Oh, it's my party and I can say what I want," Mrs. Burrige said. A servant was passing with cocktails and she grabbed two off the tray and handed me one. "I hope you like martinis," she said, and left me standing there. "My name is Theodore Fullerton," I said, "and I'm a depraved jazz musician. I prey on young women, take drugs whenever possible, but most of the time I just sleep all day and am out of work." They looked at one another, and then broke out laughing. I smiled like an idiot and sipped my drink. I thought it was going to be an awful party, but I just told the truth whenever I was spoken to, and people thought I was hilariously funny. At dinner, I was seated between Carmen Milanca and Godina Barnafi. The first course was fresh crabmeat on a slice of kiwi. Mine managed to slip off the plate and landed in the lap of Carmen Milanca. She had on a very tight, short black dress. She smiled at me, waiting to see what I would do. I reached over and plucked it from its nest. "Nice shot," she said. "It was something of a bull's-eye, wasn't it?" I said. Godina Barnafi asked me if I found wealthy women to be sexy. "Oh yes, of course," I said, "but I generally prefer poor, homeless waifs, you know, runaways, mentally addled, unwashed, sickly, starving women." "Fascinating," she said. A leg of lamb was served. Knelm Burrige proposed a toast. "To my good friends gathered here tonight, and to your great achievements in the furtherance of peace on Earth." I still had no idea what I was doing there. I mentioned this to Carmen since we'd almost been intimate. "You're probably the sacrificial lamb," she said. "The what?" I said. "The human sacrifice, you know, to the gods, for peace," she said. "I figure it's got to be you, because I recognize all the rest of them, and they're friends." "You've got to be kidding me," I said. "No, we all work for peace in our various ways, and then once a year we get together and have this dinner." "But why me?" I said. "That's Marguerite's job. She does the research all year, and she tries to pick someone who won't be missed, someone who's not giving in a positive way to society, someone who is essentially selfish. Her choices are very carefully considered and fair, I think, though I am sorry it's you this time. I think I could get to like you," she said. I picked at my food. "Well, I guess I was a rather good choice, except that some people really like my music. They even say it heals them," I said. "I'm sure it does," Carmen said, "but Marguerite takes everything into consideration. She's very thorough."

## The Promotion

I was a dog in my former life, a very good dog, and, thus, I was promoted to a human being. I liked being a dog. I worked for a poor farmer guarding and herding his sheep. Wolves and coyotes tried to get past me almost every night, and not once did I lose a sheep. The farmer rewarded me with good food, food from his table. He may have been poor, but he ate well. And his children played with me, when they weren't in school or working in the field. I had all the love any dog could hope for. When I got old, they got a new dog, and I trained him in the tricks of the trade. He quickly learned, and the farmer brought me into the house to live with them. I brought the farmer his slippers in the morning, as he was getting old, too. I was dying slowly, a little bit at a time. The farmer knew this and would bring the new dog in to visit me from time to time. The new dog would entertain me with his flips and flops and nuzzles. And then one morning I just didn't get up. They gave me a fine burial down by the stream under a shade tree. That was the end of my being a dog. Sometimes I miss it so I sit by the window and cry. I live in a high-rise that looks out at a bunch of other high-rises. At my job I work in a cubicle and barely speak to anyone all day. This is my reward for being a good dog. The human wolves don't even see me. They fear me not.

## Intruders

It was around midnight, and I knew something was out in the yard. I hadn't heard anything, I just felt it. It was a cloudy night, no stars shone through. Every now and then a bit of the moon would peek through. I walked around, shining my flashlight up and down the yard. Frogs croaked at intervals, and other night creatures scurried over the leaves. I knew something else was present nearby. Finally, my flashlight caught the face of a man standing on the far edge of my property. I think I frightened him more than he frightened me. "What are you doing here?" I said in a slightly harsh voice. "My wife kicked me out. I had nowhere to go. I live down the street in the trailer. My name's Daryl," he said. "Well, that's a pretty rough story, Daryl," I said, "but if I had a gun I'd have to shoot you. I just can't have a stranger roaming around my property at night." "I understand," he said. "Here, you can have my gun." "You have a gun?" I said. "It's legal," he said. "I'm a security guard. You can have it. Go ahead, shoot me." "Daryl, I have no interest in the world in shooting you." The moon came out just then, and I could see his face. He was just a kid, and he'd obviously been crying. "I love her," he said, "but she's got big ideas, and I guess I'm just not good enough for her." She was nearby. I could sense her sneaking up on us. Whether she, too, was armed or coming to reconcile, I had no idea. I whispered to Daryl, "Give me the gun."

## Faultfinding Tour

I was on a faultfinding tour of my own soul. Oily rags everywhere, there's a nut missing there, a hinge blowing in the wind, paint peeling, cracked windowpane, water dripping, plugged drain, dust babies twisting in the night. It's not so bad. It will still fly. A few creaks and shudders. I recall a thousand years ago I was fighting for my life. An angel in a tree surprised me. A snake swallowed me, and I traveled that way for years. It was dark and I was thirsty. Then I woke, and I was in a city. I ran. I climbed the side of a building. People shouted. Shots were fired. I was at a party, drinking champagne. It was somebody's birthday. Colby Phillips made a speech, and the lights went out. Somebody kissed me. I was in the mountains being tracked by wolves. The wind was fierce. I couldn't see where I was going, but I trudged on. I fell from a cliff. It felt like flying. Indeed, I believed I was flying. I held my arms out, and the drafts lifted me. The wolves were howling, for that is what they do so well. Their dinner was sailing through the air. The stars were out. A full moon lit up the little towns below. I was going home. My heart gladdened. Love and work. Work and love. And the loud sobbing through the night. What to make of it? The study of maps, the naming of plants, the endless railway tracks, the hawks, the bikes, the walking sticks, the masks, the postcards and paperclips and lipstick stains and you're never coming back, the soufflé was a grand success, his death came as no surprise, the telephone is on fire, the toys scattered across the lawn, a frog the size of a dog, the police car slowly spinning in the rain, hello howdy, how's your tooth, who stole the newspaper, I'm sorry, I forgot, I didn't see a thing, there's a newt in the basement saying your name, she's gone to the store for some nails, a drill, a wheelbarrow, a rake and a rabbit. The soul's mansion is ancient, and sadly needs repair. Throughout the huge, windy rooms a song still lingers, faint murmur or hum, forever, yesterday, or never again.

## The Wild Turkey

I was standing at the kitchen sink washing a few dishes, when I hear this knocking at my door. I looked out the window, but there was no one there. But the knocking continued. I looked down, and there was this wild turkey staring at me. He must have been about four feet tall, and he was looking right into my eyes. Then he pecked at the door again, and I instinctively opened it. He walked into the middle of the room and said, "Gobble gobble gobble." I poured him a bowl of dry cereal and another bowl of water. He tried the cereal and seemed to like it. He'd take four or five bites, and then wash it all down with a

couple of sips of water. Then he'd look up at me with his blue head and his red and white mottled neck. He finished the cereal, then flapped his great wings as if to thank me. His green iridescent feathers glazed the room in a magical light. I walked into the living room, and he followed me. I sat down in my chair, and he leapt up on the, back of the couch. He had the meekest, almost beseeching eyes, that seemed to say, "Whatever you want to do next is fine by me. I'm your guest, after all, and we've only just met, though I feel like I've known you for a lifetime, old friend, new friend, good friend." "Gobble gobble gobble," I said. He didn't reply, but turned his head away and stared at the TV, which was off. We sat there in silence for a good long time. Sometimes our eyes met, and we'd wander down those ancient hallways, a little afraid, a little in awe. And then we'd turn away having reached a locked door. He studied the room, too, for any clue, but it must have all seemed so alien, the beautiful vases and bowls, the paintings, scraps of a lost civilization. Hours passed like this. I felt an immense calm within me. We were sleeping in a tree on an island in an unknown land.

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