

THE *CHALLENGER* DISASTER AT SMILING GOAT

Us goatherds watched the launch on a TV so ancient, its picture so distorted, we could barely tell liftoff from incineration. Christa McAuliffe was ash raining down from the Sunshine State sky before we even understood she was dead. I was working that winter near Oviedo on Smiling Goat Ranch for a farmer by the name of Scarpalli. He had a Superman curl in the middle of his forehead and wore—unapologetically, year-round, in Florida—a pair of tremendous snow boots, as if to insulate himself from goat shit by any means possible, but I thought the limp and drag of his gait might indicate concealment of a club foot, maybe an amputation. Scarpalli was probably in his fifties, old enough to be my father. I wasn't the only dropout at Smiling Goat, but I was definitely the only one who'd dropped out in the last decade. I don't know what all had gone down in Scarpalli's life, but he was the sort of man whose aloneness on a goat ranch seemed either hard-won or like he'd come to it through some hard and serious loss. The rest of us got to Smiling Goat pretty much the way Christa McAuliffe did: fell down from the sky. Blew in on the wind like the sorry, lonely fuck-ups we were. We hung around awhile, then drifted on.

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Scarpalli didn't tread one gimpy step through the goat paddock the day the *Challenger* went up, so we didn't either. The boss just sat in his trailer, in front of the television, his face as unmoving as the man in the moon's. We hung out in his trailer awhile, too, crowding both sides of the cubicle divider that separated Scarpalli's living/sleeping area from the farm office. One goatherd—a short guy, name of Johnston—was peering over the divider like Kilroy-Was-Here, and someone told him he looked like a midget horse, hanging his nose over the trough. Johnston cursed the guy, then lifted his horsey head off the divider, embarrassed. Evenings at Smiling Goat I often-times used that divider for a puppet stage, put on shows for Scarpalli and the other herds. I'd crouch behind the divider, arms up over my head, improvising sock-puppet plays until my hands went pins-and-needles and I couldn't waggle my fingers anymore.

The night of the disaster I didn't think anyone'd be up for sock-puppet theater, so I went back to my stall in the dairy barn, sat on my foam mattress, watched the flies party on my dirty laundry. The other guys drank warm

beer and tossed horseshoes outside under an invisible rain of astronaut ash and teacher dust. Might've been the only night of my life I wished I had a book to read: I'd've gladly watched those dyslexed letters swirl around for entertainment. I sat there thinking about breathing until my head was ready to blow and I started to fiddle with my puppets just for something to do with my hands.

The kewpie-doll-faced puppet was Christa. Another had close-set eyes like Alfred E. Neuman, which came in handy years later when that's what the president looked like, but back then he was just dumb Alfred. First I had Alfred and Christa hanging out in the *Challenger* cockpit, talking, chatting. Then the other guys started to gather in my stall—*any night's a night for sock puppets!*—drinking their beers, hooting along.

I wish I could tell you Christa and Alfred didn't wind up in the sack together that night. I wish Scarpalli hadn't come to the barn with the plan for the next day's feed haul, wish he hadn't stood outside my stall and heard my ecstatic moans, "*Oh, Teacher! Oh, Alfie, I'm burning up for your love!*"

When Scarpalli showed himself in the doorway in his damn moon boots, his tired eyes brimmed with tears so thick they were manly. He said, "Some things aren't right to make fun out of." Then he told us the feed haul plan, and he walked away.

When Scarpalli was gone, some guys made fun of him, but I put the puppets away and didn't take them out again for a long time. A couple weeks later, some farmhand was telling a joke—"What color were Christa McAuliffe's eyes? Blue. One blew this way and one blew that way"—and I wished I could've said to him what Scarpalli'd said to me, but I wasn't a world-worn farmer with a Superman curl and space boots—I was a dropped-out, goat-herding sock-puppeteer, and who listens to someone like that?