

Zlateh the Goat – Isaac Bashevis Singer

At Hanukkah time the road from the village to the town is usually covered with snow, but this year the winter had been a mild one. Hannukkah had almost come, yet little snow had fallen. The sun shone most of the time.

For Reuven the furrier it was a very bad year, nobody needs a furrier when the weather's good. After long hesitation, Reuven decided to sell Zlateh the goat. She was old and gave little milk. The town butcher had offered eight gulden for her. Such a sum would buy Hanukkah candles, potatoes and oil for pancakes and gifts for the children. Reuven told his oldest boy Aaron to take the goat to town.

Aaron understood what taking the goat to the butcher's meant, but he had to obey his father. He put on his quilted jacket and a cap with earmuffs, bound a rope around Zlateh's neck, and took along two slices of bread with cheese to eat on the road. Aaron was supposed to deliver the goat by evening, spend the night at the butcher's, and return the next day with the money.

While the family said good-bye to the goat, and Aaron placed the rope around her neck, Zlateh stood as patiently and good-naturedly as ever. Zlateh trusted human beings. She knew that they always fed her and never did her any harm.

When Aaron brought her out on the road to town, she seemed somewhat astonished. She'd never been led in that *direction* before. She looked back at him questioningly, as if to say, 'Where are you taking me?' But after a while she seemed to come to the conclusion that a goat shouldn't ask questions.

The sun was shining when Aaron left the village. Suddenly the weather changed. A large black cloud with a bluish centre appeared in the east and spread itself rapidly over the sky. A cold wind blew in with it. It began to hail. It was early in the day, but it became as dark as dusk. After a while the hail turned to snow.

In his twelve years, Aaron had seen all kinds of weather, but he had never experienced a snow like this one. It was so dense it shut out the light of the day. In a short time their path was completely covered. The wind became as cold as ice. The road to town was narrow and winding. Aaron no longer knew where he was. He could not see through the snow. The cold soon permeated his quilted jacket.

At first Zlateh didn't seem to mind the change in the weather. She too was twelve years old and knew what winter meant. But when her legs sank deeper and deeper into the snow, she began to turn her head and look at Aaron in wonderment. Her mild eyes seemed to ask, 'Why are we out in such a storm?' Aaron hoped that a peasant would come along with his cart, but no-one passed by.

The snow grew thicker, falling to the ground in large, whirling flakes. Beneath it, Aaron's boots touched the softness of a ploughed field. He realized that he was no longer on the road. He had gone astray. He could no longer make out which was east or west, which way was the village, the town. Zlateh stopped. She could walk no longer. Stubbornly she anchored her cleft hooves in the earth and bleated as if pleading to be taken home. Icicles hung from her white beard, and her horns were glazed with frost.

Aaron did not want to admit the danger, but he knew just the same that if they did not find shelter, they would freeze to death. This was no ordinary storm. It was a mighty blizzard.

Suddenly he made out the shape of a hill. He wondered what it could be. Who had piled snow into such a huge heap? He moved towards it, dragging Zlateh after him. When he came near it, he realized that it was a large haystack which the snow had blanketed.

Aaron saw immediately that they were saved. With great effort he dug his way through the snow. He was a village boy and knew what to do. When he reached the hay, he hollowed out a nest for himself and the goat. No matter how cold it may be outside, in the hay it is always warm. And hay was food for Zlateh. The moment she smelled it she became contented and began to eat.

Aaron ate his two slices of bread and cheese, but after the difficult journey he was still hungry. He looked at Zlateh and noticed that her udders were full. He lay down next to her, placing himself so that when he milked her he could squirt the milk into his mouth. It was rich and sweet. Zlateh was not accustomed to being milked that way, but she did not resist. On the contrary, she seemed eager to reward Aaron for bringing her to a shelter whose very walls, floor and ceiling were made of food.

Zlateh ate frequently; she nibbled from above, below, from the left and right. Her body gave forth an animal warmth, and Aaron cuddled up to her. He had always loved Zlateh, but now she was like a sister. He was alone, cut off from his family, and wanted to talk. He began to talk to Zlateh. 'Zlateh, what do you think about what has happened to us?' he asked. 'Maaaa,' Zlateh answered. 'What does 'Maaaa' mean?' Aaron asked. 'You'd better speak up clearly.' 'Maaaa. Maaaa.' Zlateh cried. 'Well, let it be 'Maaa' then,' Aaron said patiently. 'You can't speak, but I know you understand. I need you and you need me. Isn't that right?' 'Maaaa.'

For three days Aaron and Zlateh stayed in the haystack. She fed him with her milk and helped him keep warm. She comforted him with her patience. He told her many stories, and she always cocked her ears and listened. When he patted her, she licked his hand and his face. Then he said, 'Maaaaa', and he knew it meant, I love you too.

By the third night the snow had stopped, but Aaron did not dare find his way home in the darkness. The sky became clear and the moon shone, casting silvery nets on the snow. Aaron dug his way out and looked at the world. It was all white, quiet, dreaming dreams of heavenly splendour. The stars were large and close. The moon swam in the sky as in a sea.

On the morning of the fourth day, Aaron heard the ringing of sleigh bells. The haystack was not far from the road. The peasant who drove the sleigh pointed out the way to him – not to town and the butcher, but home to the village. Aaron had decided in the haystack that he would never part with Zlateh.

Aaron's family and their neighbours had searched for the boy and the goat but had found no trace of them during the storm. They feared they were lost. Aaron's mother and sisters cried for him; his father remained silent and gloomy. Suddenly one of the neighbours came running

to their house with the news that Aaron and Zlateh were coming up the road.

There was great joy in the family. Aaron told them how he had found the stack of hay and how Zlateh had fed him with her milk. Aaron's sisters kissed and hugged Zlateh and gave her a special treat of chopped carrots and potato peel, which Zlateh gobbled up hungrily.

Nobody ever again thought of selling Zlateh, and now that the cold weather had finally set in, the villagers needed the services of the furrier once more. When Hanukkah came, Aaron's mother was able to fry pancakes every evening and Zlateh got her portion too.

Once in a while Aaron would ask her, 'Zlateh, do you remember the three days we spent together?'

And Zlateh would scratch her neck with a horn, shake her white bearded head and come out with the single sound which expressed all her thoughts, and all her love, 'Maaa'.