

SHORT STORY

# Billridge Farm

by Petra Pallier



"Observado por el pasado" by Sergio Pozo

I've always had a healthy respect for animals. I liked them in a scientific, distanced sort of way, and to watch them, and read about them; how their muscles worked and how many teeth they had and how long it took them to learn to walk.

That was the reason I looked forward to that August when my parents dropped me and my older brother off at my aunt and uncle's farm in Pennsylvania. Jimmy was there to earn a bit of pocket change by helping out in the barn. I was there to enjoy myself. I was eleven years old, and couldn't remember the last time I met Aunt Edith and Uncle Frank. Jimmy had been six at the time. When I asked him whether he remembered the farm's animals, he told me, "They had cows, and lots of cats, and an ass called Galileo. He really was an ass, dirty from here to there with his own shit," he gestured to the length of his leg, "and they let me ride him."

"Ride him?" I repeated. "Can you ride donkeys like horses?"

"I think, probably. But he threw me off."

I laughed and earned a punch to the shoulder. "Is that why you're like this?" I dared to mock him.

I regretted it shortly after because he pummelled me until I shrieked.

"Anyways, he's dead now," my brother said after he was satisfied with my screams.

I was sore all over, and rubbing my arm. "How do you know?"

"He was old," he explained. "He's probably in here." And he stamped hard on the soil beneath us. We were on our way to the farmhouse, our parents having driven off a few minutes earlier, late for their train. The thought of a rotting donkey under the ground beneath my feet creeped me out, and I didn't say another word until we reached the door.

My aunt and uncle were nice people. On the first day, it was only the four of us, but our aunt told us that tomorrow our cousin, Maggie, would be back from a sleepover at a friend's.

That evening, Aunt Edith showed us the rest of the house, and Uncle Frank gave us a tour of the farm. There was one big barn which was divided into two areas. The bigger of the two was full of cows, and there was a cacophony of sounds inside which made me want to plug my fingers into my ears. The way the huge animals stood so close together, moved their bodies and looked around with wild eyes made my heart race like I was watching one of those violent movies Jimmy showed me sometimes when our parents weren't home. I felt cramped, and nervously eyed the metal that separated us from the cows, praying it would hold if one of them decided to suddenly bolt towards me.

Finally, my uncle fed them, and the noise quieted down as the animals stooped down to their troughs to eat. Jimmy dared me to pet them, but Uncle Frank said not to disturb them while they were feeding, so I escaped the situation by feigning prudence. But my brother would not let me forget.

The rest of the barn was dedicated to the smaller animals. This was mostly goats. They were divided into several small sections and one larger one, and climbed the sides curiously as we approached, peering over the gates and trying to get a good look at us.

Just like the cows, the goats quieted down once they started feeding, all standing next to each other in a neat row — all but one. It was a large billy goat, black with a few grey spots, and it was staring at us.

"Doesn't that one eat?" I asked.

"He's retarded," my uncle said. "Almost broke 's neck once trying to break out th' gate, 'nd was never the same. Only eats once th' others are done."

The goat didn't move an inch, and I shuddered at the rectangular pupils that seemed to pierce into me.

"What's his name?" I said, not able to tear my gaze from the animal.

"They don' have names."

Before we left the barn our uncle showed us the small self-made wooden boxes with wire mesh fronts that were the enclosures for the bunnies and the guinea pigs. They made feeble squeaking sounds, and our uncle explained that it was usually Maggie's job to keep her pets fed, but since she wasn't home, he made an exception.

Our last stop was the donkey's hut, a short way away, on the other side of the farmhouse. There were two donkeys, one neat, the other with messy, long fur that hung partially matted from its skin. It looked soft, and I wanted to run my fingers through the fur, but the expression on its face was mean and it pressed its ears down as we approached.

My uncle chuckled dryly. "That's Galileo."

"No way," my brother gasped.

My uncle gave the donkey a pat on the shoulder, which seemed to soothe it a bit. "He refuses t' die. And that's Napoleon," he added with a gesture to the younger donkey. "If 'e didn't love the ol' nag so much we would've shot Galileo months 'go. But no use havin' a depressed ass."

I gave Napoleon a look-over. "Are they related?"

"Nah, Napoleon 'ere is from Sugarhill, seven miles yonder," my uncle explained, indicating the direction of the farmhouse. "They went under — what, one, two months ago, 'nd we bought goats, too. Didn't 'ave goats before."

Jimmy boldly reached out to pet Galileo's muzzle. The elderly donkey eyed him apprehensively, but let him.

"Hey there, old boy," Jimmy muttered to him. "You're even uglier than I remember."

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The first night at Billridge Farm — that was the name my uncle's father's father had given it — passed without incident. At noon the next day, I was helping Aunt Edith with the laundry when a blue pickup truck approached the farm and slowly came to a halt at the spot that our parents had stopped at. Someone climbed out of the vehicle, and it drove off.

"That'll be Maggie," my aunt said, hanging up the last of the towels on the clothesline.

"Maggie, this is your cousin, Ernie," she introduced me once Maggie was in earshot. "Be nice and say hi."

"Hi-ya," Maggie said. She seemed exhausted, and a backpack was hanging from her shoulder.

"Hi," I replied awkwardly.

Maggie's grin was toothy and her voice had a tang in it that reminded me of my uncle. I liked her immediately.

"I was at a birthday party for my best friend," she explained to me once she nudged me to follow her into the house. I watched as she unloaded her clothes from the backpack onto her bed. "She turned thirteen. I've been thirteen for almost two months."

It felt like I had to congratulate her, but she asked, "How old are you?"

"Almost twelve," I lied. I would turn twelve in January, which was a long way off.

"So, you're eleven," she said. "Which makes me two years older, which means that you have to follow my orders." She let go of her stuff and stood upright in the middle of the room, saluting me. "Sir!"

I saluted back, caught off-guard. And so it was settled.

Her first order was to follow her around and learn the names of all the animals by heart. I was glad to find out that not only were the goats nameless, but so were the cows, which made the task that much more possible.

We started with the cats. Next, she made me learn the name of the guinea pigs, and then the rabbits.

"Huh," she said and kneeled down for a closer look at the enclosure. "Rosie is missing. Hold on."

I repeated the names of the guinea pigs to memorise them while Maggie dug around the hay in the upper cage.

"She's not here!" Maggie turned around in a panic and searched the barn.

"Maybe she's hiding over there?" I pointed to a corner in which a bucket and some other tools I didn't recognise stood.

She ran to the spot I had pointed out, toppling over the bucket and the other things. She was growing frantic.

"I'm sure she's here somewhere," I tried to calm her.

"Was she here yesterday when Daddy fed them?" she demanded.

"I don't know. What does she look like?"

"She's white and really pretty. She's my favourite!" It sounded almost like an accusation.

I looked at the remaining rabbits. One of them was white as well, and I remembered seeing a white one the day before, but I didn't remember whether there was one or multiple. "I don't know. Sorry. Maybe Uncle Frank knows?"

"I told him he has to count them!"

She ran out of the barn and I followed her, struggling to keep up with her. We found her father in the shed, repairing a spade.

"Daddy! How many bunnies were there yesterday? Did you count them?"

"I didn't count 'em, honey. Didn't have to. They were all there."

She let out a noise that sounded like a growl. "How'd you know they were all there if you didn't count them?"

My uncle threw a look my way that made me feel like all of this was my fault.

"We'll find Rosie," I said meekly. "She can't be far. Rabbits are slow unless something's chasing them. And Madame — Clover wouldn't chase her, right?"

Maggie shook her head. "No, but Poppet or Rio might."

Before I could ask who that was, she had grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the shed. We ran around it to the backside, where two dogs lay in the shade, trying to hide from the August sun. I hadn't seen them before. The smaller one, a mongrel, was on a chain and lay close to the larger one, which I recognised as a Rottweiler.

"Poppet's a nice one, she wouldn't hurt a fly, but she gets excited sometimes. And Rio's been chained since the kittens came."

"So Poppet might have chased Rosie away?" I asked.

"I doubt it," she said and tapped on the Rottweiler's flank so it would get up. "See? She's lazy in this heat."

Without any clues to go by we spent the next few hours looking for the missing rabbit. I gave up the search in the late afternoon and decided to take a shower. Maggie, disappointed by my abandoning her, was still looking for Rosie when I had finished. My aunt, now finished with chores, had joined the search.

"Can domesticated rabbits survive in the wild?" I asked her.

"I don't know, love," she said. When Maggie looked at her with despair she added, "But Rosie's a tough one, I think she'll be fine as long as we find her tomorrow. Let's leave it for now, okay? Maybe our shouting frightened her even more, and she's just waiting for a bit of quiet before she comes out from her hiding place."

I tried to cheer up Maggie by suggesting we visit the donkeys. She agreed, sniffing.

My brother was there, feeding them.

"Hey-ya," Maggie greeted him.

Jimmy didn't turn around. "Hi, Maggie. Found your rabbit yet? Frank told me she's probably dead."

"He did not!" she protested and walked up to Galileo to pet him. The donkey snorted and shook his head appreciatively. Maggie hummed. "At least I've still got you," she whispered into his ear. "My old friend."

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The next morning Uncle Frank called us all to the breakfast table early and told us that Galileo had passed away in the night.

I glanced at my brother, curious whether there would be grief in his expression, but there was only surprise.

"He finally kicked the bucket?" he asked.

"Yeah," our uncle confirmed stoically, "I've already moved 'im, so the flies can't get 'im."

And that was that.

Later, after fruitlessly searching for Rosie on the whole farm yet again, Maggie and I visited Napoleon to see if he was lonely. The poor animal was standing in the corner of the hut, shaking, breathing quickly.

"Napoleon, boy," Maggie soothed him while petting him. "Old people die, even if you love them, and that's okay." She turned to me. "My mother told me that."

"Galileo wasn't people," I said. "He was a donkey."

"Donkeys are people," Maggie insisted. "Every animal with a name is a person. That's why it's important to give them names and remember them."

"So the cows and the goats aren't people?"

"I hope not," she said. "We eat them."

I shrugged and gave Napoleon some pets while Maggie quizzed me on the names again.

When we decided to leave, I noticed my undone shoelaces, and when I bent down to tie them, something caught my eye. The floor was covered with fresh grass for the animal, unlike yesterday's dry hay, but under the trough were some specks of hay left. If it had been just this, I wouldn't have looked at it twice. As it was, I noticed a redness.

"Hold on," I told Maggie, who had already left the hut but came back when she heard me.

I reached under the trough and picked a clump of hay that was sticky with something dark red.

"Blood," Maggie said when she knelt down next to me. "You think Rosie was here?" She cowered down on the ground and looked around, searching for her beloved rabbit.

"I don't think so," I said. "It's gotta be Galileo's, right?"

We exchanged worried glances. Both of us had assumed that the donkey had died peacefully of old age, and the possibility of a more gruesome death was discomfoting.

"Daddy would have told us if something happened," Maggie said after a while, but her shifting eyes and questioning tone did not convince me.

"Would he?" I asked. "Maybe he didn't want to make us sad."

Maggie considered this. "He did move his body before we could see it. When Shelly died, he let us say goodbye to her before he buried her. Shelly was our old dog."

Together, we dug through the grass for a while and found two more clumps of hay, both bloody. Maggie held them all up to her face and sniffed them.

I grimaced, disgusted. "What was that for?"

"I thought maybe I could smell what happened."

"And?"

She shrugged. "It just smells like blood."

At eleven, I was fortunate to not have had many experiences with blood, and my curiosity overtook me. I grabbed the hay and sniffed it like Maggie had done. It smelt strongly of iron, and I almost gagged.

"Dry blood doesn't smell, I think," Maggie said. "So it's fresh."

"Maybe Galileo died right before breakfast?" I suggested.

"But why would he have been bleeding?"

We didn't come up with a satisfactory answer and gave poor Napoleon — of whom we were quite sure now that he had been perturbed by however Galileo had met his end — a few consoling kisses before leaving.

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Unfortunately, Galileo's death wasn't the only one that day. In the early evening, Uncle Frank and Jimmy called for us. They had found Rosie's body in the barn, in the big goat enclosure. My uncle wouldn't let Maggie look at her and ordered her to wait outside while he, my brother and I examined the cadaver. Not much remained of the rabbit. Its front and back parts lay inches apart, as if ripped from one another, and entrails spilt out onto the hay.

One leg and an ear were missing altogether. I could only see it for a moment before forcing myself to look away, swallowing down my gag reflex.

"What happened to it?" Even my brother's voice was subdued.

"Fox must've gott'n t' it," our uncle said. "Maybe a badger or a stoat."

"Into the box?" I asked, examining the enclosure in which the other rabbits remained, all of them blissfully ignorant of the fate that had befallen Rosie. The wire wasn't tampered with, and the wood was robust — unbreakable for a small carnivore.

"She got out somehow, hid, got found." Uncle Frank took down a large iron shovel that had been hanging on the wall. "But not by y'all."

"What will you do with her?" I asked meekly.

"Nothin' you hav'to worry about," he said, and entered the goat enclosure. No goats were there at that moment — he must have driven them off.

"What should I tell Maggie?"

"Whatever keeps her quiet the best."

My brother followed me out of the barn once our uncle started to shovel up Rosie's remains. He surprised me when he told Maggie, who had been impatiently waiting and had rivulets of tears streaming down her uneven cheeks, that Rosie had been sick and had hidden to die alone, as animals often do.

Maggie let out a heartbroken wail and punched the barn door twice before stumbling to the ground. I offered to help her up, but she refused my hand.

My brother and I settled down next to her.

"I wanna see her," she sobbed after a while.

"Your father's already preparing to bury her," I said.

"I wanna see her!" she repeated, snot coming out of her nose. She didn't seem thirteen to me anymore, rather six or even five, lamenting the loss of a beloved stuffed animal. Of course it was more than that, but Rosie had only been a rabbit after all, and she had so many more of those. I didn't dare speak my thoughts aloud, though, and instead told her, "Don't you want to remember her alive?"

It took an hour or so before she had calmed down. Utterly drained of energy, she went to sleep early, and I followed her example. I was exhausted and a headache was creeping up on me. There'd be weather, my mother would have said. I waited — lights out, cuddled into the

rough woollen blanket — for the rain to start. But no rain came; the weather hadn't broken. An eery silence covered the farm, as if everyone, even the animals, were holding their breath, waiting like I was for a thunderstorm that would not yet come. I couldn't hear any of the others walking around the house, even though I was sure they hadn't all gone to bed. Neither could I hear Maggie, who had been sobbing in her room (clearly audible to me, only a short distance away) until an hour before.

Minutes passed, and I grew drowsy, thinking of what had befallen Rosie and whether there had been anything I could have done to stop it from happening.

I started as a sudden noise ripped through the quiet night. It was a howling, loud and sharp. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window, but I could see nothing outside. The clouds were hiding the moon and so no light shone on the farm.

A second noise joined the first, and I recognised it as the barking of a dog. Then I noticed that my heart had been racing, and how it was still pounding against my chest.

Only the dogs, I told myself as the howling and barking continued. Finally, I saw a hunched silhouette of someone in the dark. My uncle, I surmised, had gone out to calm the dogs.

He seemed to be unsuccessful because the howling did not cease. I fell asleep with my pillow pressed against my ears.

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At breakfast, I asked what had been the reason for the dog's unrest. Nobody could tell me.

"They're usually so quiet," Maggie said. She was still in a sombre mood, but faring well considering the circumstances. "Especially Poppet."

"They didn't seem quiet to me," I said. "Uncle Frank couldn't even calm them down, isn't that right?" I addressed my uncle.

He regarded me tacitly for a few seconds. Something in his expression told me that he did not like to hear me talk. It was humbling.

"I didn't," my uncle finally said. "The dogs ain't mine t' manage." His gaze travelled to my aunt. "Did'ya quiet the dogs yesterday, Edie?"

She was taking a sip of her coffee at that moment and shook her head.

My veins grew icy. "But I saw someone outside." I looked at my brother accusingly.

"Wasn't me," he said.

"Who'd you see?" Maggie asked.

"I don't know, but I saw someone walking to the shed. I figured it was one of you guys."

"If there was someone out there it explains t' dogs," Uncle Frank said. "Could've been some vagabond, who knows. Nothin' to get your panties in a twist 'bout." His voice was harsh.

Aunt Edith cleared her throat pointedly. "Anyway," she started, addressing me. "If you see someone again, you tell us."

I promised I would.

"We have a gun, and we can defend our property," she continued.

"That's right," my uncle said. "If they think they can steal a cow, I say let 'em try."

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Maggie and I decided to investigate the nightly figure. It was something to do, something to keep her mind off her dear, dead Rosie. After checking up on the dogs, which were restless and jumpy, we vanished into the forest nearest to them. We collected sturdy sticks and beat the bushes with them, imagining a dirty vagabond being roused from their sleep. Though we were searching I was secretly afraid to find what we were looking for. I grew tenser when Maggie decided we should split up to cover more ground.

The ground was wet, and my shoes were soon full of leaves that stuck on with mud. I abandoned my trusty stick and began walking silently, searching — with my eyes only — for anything unusual. I was half-aware that if there was a criminal hiding in the woods they could easily overpower me, and that there was a reason we didn't tell my aunt and uncle about our little quest: they wouldn't have allowed it.

A half-hour passed, and I grew restless. The trees around me were rustling from a cool wind that had picked up, and my eyes were drawn to every sound. My heart beat faster, and my stomach turned. I had an unshakeable foreboding that something bad was about to happen.

Then, a cry — loud and shrill. Maggie.

My blood ran cold, and I rushed in the direction the scream had come from. It took only a minute or so until I saw her. I had expected to see her in a chokehold, attacked by some stranger, struggling with her usual ferocity to get free. But it seemed I was too late.

Her body lay on the ground, face up. I saw blood pooling around her middle and staining the part of her clothes that covered her stomach. I wasn't close enough to see her eyes, or whether she was breathing, but I knew, somehow, that she was dead. But it was not this which rooted me to the spot where I stood, bound by a terrible fright. It was the sight of the black billy goat standing over her, lapping up the blood.

I think I must have screamed, for it suddenly turned towards me, and I thought it would run, but it did not; it stared — its muzzle smeared with blood — and bleated. And then it stood up on its hind legs. I met its eyes in horror and stretched out my arms in front of me, vaguely aware that the goat was readying an attack. I thought it was brandishing its horns, as I had seen goats do. I was wrong. It bleated once more, a sound so utterly human-like I took a step backwards and fell. Then, without returning back to its four-legged position, I saw it bolting towards me.