

What the World Should Be On the Lookout For

Skip backed the goat trailer to the edge of the Minit Market lot, then drove forward, stopping his pickup at the four-lane street to wait for a red car and a semi to pass. While waiting he switched stations on the radio--a country deejay blabbing on one and Billy Ray Cyrus on the other--and sipped from the coffee he'd just bought. Then he pulled out, keeping to the inside lane, headed west toward Downtown Valdosta.

He couldn't decide whether he liked Cyrus's voice or not--all that jumping around was what had made him--but he did like the steel guitar in the background. He turned up the volume and distanced his front bumper from the semi's rear, slowing at double railroad tracks to keep from upsetting the old wood trailer, then on past facing rows of white colonial houses, a fish market, and the first of linking shops that made up the southside of town. Pickup and trailer gaining on the upslope.

On his left, a young woman with fat red hair was walking briskly east along the sidewalk, where skimpy trees were wintering in concrete tubs. Her hands were pocketed in a long black coat, pointy nose lifted to the cold bright air. She had on black boots. She looked spunky.



Suddenly, he sensed, then saw, the shadowy underbody of the semi, his front bumper almost kissing ass with its rear bumper, cankered dust and oil on the crossjoints and axles. He stomped the brakes, overturning the coffee cup between his legs; the semi stretched away as the pickup lurched, trailer bucking and uncoupling with a clatter like two cars colliding.

"Huh!" Skip said, gazing in the rearview mirror. The trailer tilted forward with the hitch jack-hammering on the pavement and rolled straight back and into the path of a white car, barely missing it and swerving onto the left sidewalk and picking up speed on the downgrade. Slat-wood sidebodies clacking, it rocked across an intersection, like a car with four flats, banking traffic, and barreled east with the hitch etching esses in the concrete.

Billy Ray Cyrus still blated "Achy Breaky Heart" while the trailer rolled on, clipping parking meters and trash cans, and leaving in its wake the stench of goats and a concert of car horns, while Skip just sat frozen, saying, "Huh!" When his body thawed, he hopped out and left his pickup parked in the middle of the street and took up the chase with the merchants and shoppers from the linking shops and the multitudes from the traffic jam.

Ahead, he could see the woman in the black coat and boots, still jaunting along the sidewalk. Skip yelled, "Hey, you! Look out!" and the throng of runners ahead, alongside and behind joined in. "Hey, lady, look out!" She kept walking, head high and oblivious, due east.

At a dip in the sidewalk, in front of a shoe repair shop, the trailer almost stopped. It rocked but slued into motion again, brittle old wood gleaming in the sun. A burst of pigeons like exploding courthouse marble. Clacking and screaming like a boxcar, the trailer



headed centerpoint for the woman prancing toward the next intersection. Suddenly she halted, slowly turned her head; green eyes shocked wide, wider, as the trailer rollicked close, closer, floor striking her just below the buttocks and scooping her up in proper sitting position. As the trailer traveled on, across the intersection and onto the next stretch of sidewalk, she sat, then lay, and sat again, squealing "My word!" Black boots paddling as if she were still walking.

Like marathon runners, Skip and the crowd tramped on, witnessing ahead the trailer with the woman catapulting across the fish market ramp to the oak-shady sidewalk along the row of colonial houses, then leveling out again and free-wheeling toward the end of the sidewalk and the sunny open space where railroad tracks branched across the highway north and south. Rear wheels brattling in the ballice of the railroad right-of-way, the trailer pitched and groaned, hitch plowing a furrow in the rocks and weeds, then bucked across the tracks, finally rolling to rest in a ditch of frostburned weeds. The woman sat stunned, dangling her feet as if on a hayride.

Sirens screamed in the cold blue air, seeming to come from all directions, and two black police cars sped across the tracks and stopped, one angled toward the front and one behind the trailer. A jowly policeman got out of the lead car, scratching under his cap, while the other one talked on the car radio.

Skip eased across the tracks to the trailer, his long face misery-etched. "Hey!" he said to the woman, "you awright?"

"I guess," she said and tittered. "Where's my pocketbook?"



"On your shoulder," said Skip, "right there." He reached out and touched her shoulder like someone might touch the dead.

"Oh!" she said and looked at the strap and re-hitched it.

"She's in shock," a man said and tiptoed across the tracks in tan suede hushpuppies.

"You ain't hurt?" Skip asked the woman.

"Not as I know of." Still sitting, she looked down at her booted feet.

The jowly policeman wedged between her and Skip, questioning her-- was she hurt? what happened?--writing, writing on a clipboard and keeping a bead on the multiplying crowd across the tracks. Somebody taking pictures. Flashes and snicks like a sudden star storm. The sour reek of goats hovered over the ditch with the woman's hyacinth perfume.

The other cop got out of the car, leaving his door open and loosing staticky radio racket, and tried to make the woman lie on the trailer bed in the goat manure and straw. She stood for the first time, wobbling and looking back at her ride.

"Anybody see what happened?" said the jowly cop.

Everybody began talking at once, bunching on the railroad tracks between creosoted crossties.

The jowly cop walked among them like Jesus, and when he got back to the trailer, he stepped up to Skip. "So that's your heap of junk, right?" said the cop.

"Wellsir," said Skip, "that's my goat trailer."



The policeman mumbled something about the "shoddy hookup" on Skip's trailer, which he kept waltzing around and kicking, blowing back at the crowd to disperse.

The woman stood off and listened, shaking her head like a dog with ear mites. "Wait a minute," she said, holding up both hands. "Let me get the straight of this: this fellow's towing a trailer, right?"

"Right," said the jowly policeman.

"And this trailer...this goat trailer...comes loose and rolls down the street, right?" She flipped her red hair and it cascaded over her shoulders like fire over a log.

"Right," said the policeman.

"And it runs me down on the sidewalk and scoops me up"--she talked with her hands like an interpreter for the deaf--"and carries me down the sidewalk and over the tracks and..."

"And parks you right here," said Skip and laughed, "and ain't harmed a hair on your head. Right?"

"Why, you!" she said and reset her purse strap and walked in circles, trying her legs. Cameras snapped among the crowd on the railroad tracks.

Skip had suddenly seen the humor in the whole picture, like a jigsaw puzzle coming together, and laughed again.

"Lady," said the other policeman, "you don't have any business walking around like that. I've sent for an ambulance..."

"An ambulance!" she said. "I'm not hurt."

"Right!" said Skip and laughed again.

"How would you know?" she said.

"I bet it was kind of fun," he said. "Wadn't it?"



"Fellow," said the jowly policeman, "you just stay out of the lady's way, hear. And I wouldn't be laughing if I was you; I'm fixing to write you up for everything I can think of." And he wrote some more, while cameras snicked and people talked and another siren sounded, this one from an orange and white wagon bumping over the tracks and halting on the road shoulder.

"I'm not going in that ambulance, sir," said the woman. "I'm all right."

"See," said Skip, "she's awright. Right?"

"How would you know?" She jabbed a finger at his chest. Shutters clicked on cameras like summer crickets.

"You better go on to the hospital, lady," said the other policeman, "for insurance purposes."

"I don't have no insurance," she said and started to cry, scratchy chugging sobs from the throat. "I was just on my way over yonder to put in for a job." She pointed to the office of the lumber company across the highway, where stacked bleached lumber set in blocks in the fenced yard.

"So, you're out of work?" called a dark man with pushed-up hair and a camera, stepping from the crowd. He raised his camera to his face for another shot; a fat woman with short yellow curls took notes.

"Well, almost out of work," the victim said. "I sing on weekends at Mama Mia's."

"Well, ain't that something!" said Skip, moving toward her again. "I play the steel at Cracker Fire's, not half a mile from there." He longed to brush the goat shit like wet ashes off the back of her wool coat.



"Do I care?" She quit crying and circled the gurney and the two EMTs trying to buckle on a blood pressure cuff and make her lie down.

Apparently neither did the man with the camera care; he scooted between Skip and the woman for another shot of her.

"Ma'am," said the other policeman, "how bout just hopping up on that stretcher."

"I got an appointment," she said and started to walk off across the highway.

"Lady!" called the photographer, "hold on a minute. What's your name?"

She turned around, "Katy Land," she said and bolted a smile.

When Skip got home that evening with his two new goats, a billy and a nanny, he'd already heard the entire story of the run-away trailer on the radio. No mention of his name--they'd called him "the owner of the run-away rig"--just Katy Land, local country singer, and the fact that he'd been charged with vehicular negligence, public endangerment, failure to yield right-of-way, improper permit for hauling, improper parking, disturbing the peace, and contempt (for laughing, he supposed).

He stood in the cold March wind of his backyard, sun raying through the tall pines that dwindled out from the thick woods behind, and watched the black-and-white pied billy parade the parameters of the wire pen: head high with his white beard strutted like a stodgy old man's. The other two billies gazed out with cataracted eyes from the lean-to door, pawing the churned dirt, while the new nanny sorted into the clan of other nannies and knobby-kneed kids. The new nanny was the prettiest goat Skip had ever seen--not that he was an authority.



He'd decided to raise goats after he'd bought his little spot in the woods near Withers, mainly because he couldn't afford cattle and wanted something living to give the place purpose and motion. Not so lonesome with animals around. Skip was about to turn forty, had spent almost half his life working bars and living on other people's property, companies he'd worked for in the post woods or pulp woods, whatever he could find to do that would keep him outdoors, preferably in the woods. Time to settle down, he'd thought, though the very thought of spending Friday or Saturday nights at home alone made his gums itch.

Also, he'd thought that selling goats might bring in some extra cash, but so far he'd sold only one to an old Mexican fellow, a migrant worker from Ned Perry's farm up the road. What Skip earned playing his steel on weekends barely paid for his food and electricity. He played for the love of it. On a good night at Cracker Fire's (nicknamed for Joe Cracker, the owner, because of his white hair and red face) twenty-five people might wander in to drink and dance. But now, since the rain had started in January, his regular job in the post woods had been put on hold. Couldn't get into the woods without bogging down. And he'd found himself having to get by on what he earned playing his steel. He'd saved a little money, and so had felt safe investing in the two new goats. That is, before the trip to Valdosta and the fine for the accident.

He watched the prissy black nanny a few more minutes. She had black electric hair that reminded him of his mama's--burnished needle tips that fanned from a wrap of thick fur. His mama had been killed when he was eight, shot down by one of the women in the turpentine camp



where Skip and his mama were living after his daddy died. Shot dead after a quarrel over the neighbor-lady's husband. Skip had witnessed the shooting and his mama's dying, but couldn't recall one thing about that day, only the facts, as if they were written in his head. No images. Not that he'd tried to conjure an image; he didn't want one. Bad history requires no pictures, just recording.

After the sun had set behind the pines, rendering a smoky look to the spaces between the scabby brown trunks, he walked around the unpainted old house to the front yard to get his newspaper. A blanket of russet pine straw lended to the orangy light of the slanted sun.

He got the newspaper from the box by the dirt road and started back, peeling the rubber band from the tube-like roll as he went up the stoop and into the dim cold house, which always smelled of cold soot and stale coffee. He sat in the wallowed-out recliner by the cold wood heater and took off his boots, then got up to start a fire. First, lighting a splinter and sticking it inside the dungeon of soot, then piling some pine cones on. When the little pyre burned high with a stack of smoke, he laid two split oak pieces and closed the lid, smelling the clean burn.

He opened the Valdosta Democrat, turned on the warped pole lamp by his recliner, and reared back with his socked feet up. But when he saw the front page he sat again, clanking down the footrest.



The entire top half of the front page showed a color picture of Katy Land with her reddish hair neon and her face glazy red. Crying and pointing a finger at a half-man, which he recognized as himself by the half denim jacket with a fur collar and the left leg of his faded jeans and his boot and halved hat. The headlines read, "Local Singer Struck Down by Run-away Goat Trailer."

Kinks of smoke seeped through the cracks and seams of the old iron burner, and he had to get up and open the damper and the front door, letting out the smoke and letting in the last of the light. And again he sat, reading the newspaper. He read it once, then reread to be sure he hadn't misread. According to the article--which had given the wrong street and the wrong time of day--Katy Land had been carried to the hospital by ambulance, with "minor injuries."

Maybe she had come back after the policeman finished writing up Skip and after he'd re-hitched the trailer--huh uh, that didn't make sense. Maybe she got to the lumber company office and decided she was injured after all and had gone to the hospital. Maybe he was in worse trouble than he knew. What if she'd died since then and the law was looking for him? All he'd given was a rural route address--all he'd had to give, no telephone--twenty miles east of Valdosta. At the time of the accident, it had been easy enough to believe she hadn't been hurt: she wore a long heavy coat and boots and the trailer had struck her cushioned thighs and she'd simply sat. No bumps or bangs that he could recall. But looking back over all that might have happened, Skip imagined the worst. He read the part about himself--now "the goatman"--and found that even he tended to think of the goatman as a bum, negligent scum, what the world should be on the lookout for.



He got up and went to the kitchen with leftover rags of the previous owner's blue linoleum on the floor and counter, and got a beer from the refrigerator, then went to take a shower, slugging down half a can before he got into the moldy stall. He'd leave early--it was seven-thirty now, he started playing at nine--and drop by Mama Mia's to find out how Katy Land was doing. Might even go by the hospital to see her if she was there.

But before he could back his pickup from the pen where he'd parked, an old Mercury, more rust than green, pulled off the dirt road and around the house, blocking him. He could see the wet-black heads of two Mexican boys through the windshield, and the third head of a small girl between them. If they'd come after another goat, he'd tell them to wait till tomorrow.

They got out, walking toward Skip's truck, the cold evening wind whipping at their baggy pants, which they considered the height of American style, and the wispy cotton skirt of the little girl, who was all eyes.

"How y'all doing?" said Skip, leaving the truck door open so they'd know he was leaving and walking fast to show he was in a hurry.

The two boys grinned and blared their eyes and stuck out their hands to shake. Skip shook both their hands and spoke to the little girl, who only nodded but kept her big black eyes on the goats huddling around the lean-to shed. So far, nobody had spoke, and Skip figured it was because their daddy, the old Mexican who'd bought the last goat, had told them that Skip and he had barely been able to communicate. Skip had taken the man to Pender Creek, to one of his traps, and tried to give him a coon--lots of Negroes ate raccoon, so maybe Mexicans



did. The old man with rotted teeth had cackled and stuck out his hand, just shy of the caught coon's reach, jerking it as the coon snarled and snapped. "'Better look out!'" Skip had warned, "'might have rabies.'" The old man started jabbering and stuck out his hand again, this time letting the coon's teeth graze him, as if matching reflexes, and cackled like a mad man. Finally, Skip had got the message across that the man could have the coon, that it was no pet, and then the man tried to pay him.

"Listen," said Skip to the two boys now, waving his arms with a canceling motion to show no selling goats today. "I was just leaving, got to hurry, how bout coming back tomorrow." How to say tomorrow in Spanish? "To-mor-row." He pointed east, then raised both hands in the air to indicate that they could come when the sun rose again.

The little girl stepped between the two boys and began jabbering in Spanish. The taller boy jabbered back, grinning at Skip.

"Huh?" said Skip, cupping his ear to hear around the wind in the pines and the block of language.

The little girl tugged on his jacket. "My brother say he can't come back on the morrow, got to have goat tonight for supper."

Both boys stretched their liquid eyes and grinned, nodding, and so did Skip. "Tell 'em I've got a important appointment," he said, "can't do business right now."

She babbled again, shaking her head, her nut-brown face cracked by scowls. The shorter boy turned toward the car and stood against the hood, cheap but new white tennis shoe on the bumper, while the taller one babbled and the little girl translated. "My brother say he have to have goat now."



"Well, I be damned!" said Skip and the little girl repeated that too in Spanish. He hadn't meant for her to do that; now they might not come back. He needed the money. Maybe they were hungry. "Tell him nevermind"--and the girl jabbered beat for beat--"to just come on over to the pen and let me pick him out one."

Skip was beginning to see why nobody in Swannoochee County liked the migrants--pushy people--except the farmers, who could get cheap, hardworking labor from Mexico, not spoiled like the Negroes who'd gotten wise to their rights as Americans. Even the Negroes resented the Mexicans, and Skip suspected there was some power play involved: Negroes at last had found somebody beneath them to Lord their power over, same as the whites had done to the Negroes for so many years. The hierarchy of humans, like animals, how things worked. Fair or not.

Skip didn't want to get his good jeans and western shirt dirty, so when he got to the pen gate with the Mexican boys right on his heels--they didn't know how Americans felt about their space either--he pointed to the freckled white yearling that stood between the new black nanny and a grayish one for shelter from the wind. "That little goat, there--right yonder," Skip said. He wasn't sure how specific the tiny translator was, and figured he'd best rely on hand motions and tone.

The taller boy slunk through the gate with the shorter one behind, like foxes in a chicken yard, and the little girl clung to the fence with her small grubby hands. Then all hell broke loose.

Trotting and dodging among the skittering goats, the two boys chased one and then the other, breaking when the herd broke in kaleidoscopic swirls and changing directions. The last dram of light through the wind-wrung pines playing along the animal and human backs,



and the dirt, a density of flesh and matter that knotted and shifted in the blister of wind, carrying the ripe goat musk and howls over the darkening woods where pines tipped the blank sky--a star or two peeking through the stretched canvas--till the motion lost its flow in the close confines.

Hunkering low, the boys lunged at the old grayish nanny and then the new black one, who pranced along the fence with her fine hair rippling in the wind. The kids blated and scuttled beneath the stuffed bellies of the nannies. The billies snorted and pawed and butted the fence, horns clacking against the wire, while Skip yelled and motioned for the boys to come back for better instructions. They stopped once, letting the herd settle in a corner like sand in water, looked at Skip and nodded, then dove for the herd again, this time seeming to have come to some consensus on the new black nannie, who pranced zigzag with her sharp face high and sniffed the wind.

One behind and one ahead, ignoring Skip who dashed along the fence, shouting, the boys cornered her, the taller one grabbing her hind quarters and the shorter one latching around her proud neck, wallowing her to the ground. She lowed and kicked, then lay stiff on one side. They laughed, each catching and twisting two legs, and dragged her toward the gate.

"Wrong goat," said the little girl, eyeing her brothers.

They looked up at Skip and began babbling. Questioning hollows engraved on their thick coppery brows. They turned the nanny loose and stepped aside. She reared on her front hooves and stiffened her back, trembling as she jacked her hind quarters with the strength of her flanks and tucked her splayed legs, broken like sticks. Her hind end flopped in the hoof-plowed dirt. She blated and walled her eyes, then



crawled on her belly toward the shed, hooking her front hooves in the dirt before her with hind legs dragging like skids.

"Dammit!" Skip circled and watched the nanny as she lowed and lay in the churned dirt, wrenching her neck. "Y'all didn't have to go and break her legs."

Before the little girl could translate, the boys seemed to understand his tone, and they stood mumbling with sorrowful eyes trained on the new black nanny, the taller boy swiping at his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

Skip turned toward the house, striding up the back steps and inside, and took his .22 rifle from the deer-antler rack above the slow-ticking wood heater.

When he got back, the boys were still standing inside the pen, staring out at him, while the little girl watched the nanny blat and twitch.

Skip walked to the fence, mute faces following him, and aimed through a square of wire and pulled the trigger, and the new nanny shuddered and went slack, electric black hair blowing in the wind. "Now," he said to the child, "tell your brothers to go get her. No charge."

He got to town at fifteen minutes till nine and knew if he stopped by Mama Mia's he'd be late getting to Cracker Fire's. He'd have to take his chances; he had to know if Katy Land was hurt. He took a couple of shortcuts to the north end of Valdosta and pulled into the parking lot where Mama Mia's was set between a convenience store and a trophy shop. The parking lot was so full of cars and pickups that he



had to park before a drug store at the end of the shop row where it seemed colder because it was darker.

Getting out of his truck, he could hear music and the keen curdling voice of a female singer, barely muted by the plate glass front with a drawn reed blind. He'd never heard Katy Land sing, had only heard of her, as he'd heard of other local groups, and didn't know if it was her singing or not.

He opened the front door to a storm of smoke and festering orange light and tried to peer around the drummer on the stand to his right. He still couldn't see the female singer without stepping further inside, but the girly-faced bouncer stopped him. "Two dollars," he mouthed.

"I was just looking for somebody," said Skip.

"Two dollars to look," said the bouncer, more fat than muscle.

Skip tried again to look, couldn't see past the steel guitar player, and handed the fellow a couple of ones and went on in.

Sure enough, there stood Katy Land, red-haired and decked-out in a white western shirt and skirt with flowerettes of silver buttons. He had to walk toward the bar at the rear because the gap behind him had closed with people; and on the way back, around the close-set tables, he locked eyes with Katy Land. She was singing into a microphone and slinging her head, red hair oozing over her shoulders. Must have been two hundred people packed into the twenty-five-table bar. Even the latticed alcove of the billiard room, to the left of the bandstand, was crowded. Nobody shooting pool, all watching and clapping or dancing on the wood square before the band.



When he was certain Katy had seen him, he tipped his dove felt hat and smiled, trying to make his way back to the door along the edge of the dance floor.

An older woman and man were dancing, who he recognized as one of Cracker Fire's regulars. He looked around and spied three or four others who came on Friday and Saturday nights to hear him and the others play, loyal to Cracker Fire's if not to the band. Half the time, they were so soused they didn't notice if Skip and the band played the same tunes twice in a row, something they often did when the night dragged on, waiting for two in the morning.

He eyed Katy again, sure her green eyes were on him, though she smiled and twitched from head to toe, setting off a medley of twinkling silver buttons and fringe.

Relieved, he left and got in his truck, hitting the Lakeland Highway to Cracker Fire's, not a mile away. The wind had died and the two lone cars in the parking lot had iced over.

Inside, hot and smoky after the dry clear cold of the lot, the band was playing for a drop-chested man at the bar and two women with bleached cotton-candy hair at one of the tables. Joe, with white hair and a fire-red face, behind the bar, stuck up his hand sullenly at Skip and handed the man another Bud.

Skip stepped onto the bandstand and behind the steel guitar, slipping on the steel rings, and eased into the old country tune with the crown of his hat turned to the near-empty room.



Despite having lost his crowd to Mama Mia's, Skip was still relieved that Katy Land was fine. But when he got his Saturday morning copy of the Valdosta Democrat, his nerves wadded the length of his long slim body. Again there was a picture of Katy Land, singing in the button-studded white outfit, her face glazy red, like scalded flesh.

LOCAL SINGER ESCAPED SERIOUS INJURY: WILL SHE SUE?

And again Skip had to read the article twice, this time to make sense out of the wording. A couple of times, the writer had made reference to what the policeman said, or what the "negligent rig-owner" said, using he in place of a specific name. Skip was the one, it seemed, who'd said, "'I'm fixing to write you up for everything I can think of.'" And when Katy Land had backtracked over the story of how the trailer had scooped and carried her all that distance--the Democrat said clear across town and past the turpentine plant--Skip had laughed and said, "'You're not hurt, lady; don't act like you are'"! And she'd said, "'I'll see you in court, goatman'"!

Last night, Joe had threatened to fire the whole band and the three bandmembers had left half-mad with Skip, though they acted as if they were sympathetic. They had just hired the young fellow on the drums, and the boy looked wilted and defeated. Skip knew he wouldn't be back.

All day in the bright cold, Skip worked with the goats, finally separating the new billy from the others, bloodied from the jab of New Billy's horns. And the other nannies and kids frolicked in the wind, while New Billy pawed and hooked the wire divider in the next pen. None mourning or even aware of the missing new nanny.



Skip tried to get his mind off the nanny and Katy Land and the fact--if it was a fact--that she might sue him. He could lose the place, his falling-down house and the goats. He'd never given much thought to money and ownership because he'd never needed much money to live the simple life of a home-bound steel guitar player. He'd certainly never reached for the Bigtime like most of the country artists he knew. (He'd heard that Katy Land had been to Nashville and come home whipped, more than once.) But now he fumed over the injustice of the news treatment of the accident. He'd accidentally run Katy Land down and made a star of her and a nothing of himself. Overnight. An overnight-sensation, as they would say in Nashville.

He knew from talk among the musicians--rotating from group to group--that the band at Mama Mia's, Katy's band, had likewise played to a small group of regulars, that nobody really listened to the band or thought of them as artists, with or without talent. Some sideshow for their dozing over beer, or a place to pick up somebody to dance with and maybe take home for the weekend. Skip had been in the business long enough not to take disregard too seriously--not to take seriously what anybody thought. He would quit if he ever did start worrying over such. But damned if he could swallow this new twist of tabloid events against him.

The closer it got to night, sun sinking low, still and cold behind the pines, the more he stopped fuming and started fretting over whether Katy Land would sue. Had she actually made such a statement to the reporters yesterday and he hadn't heard? Or had she said it to them last night at Mama Mia's where they took the last picture?



Finally, while taking a shower, he decided to go back to Mama Mia's, maybe check the crowd, his old regulars, and even find out if the fact of her planning to sue was a fact.

When he got to Mama Mia's, cold dark settling with fog over the parking lot, again he had to park before the drug store at the end, just off a weedy field.

Inside, he spied the two women with bleached cotton-candy hair among his other regulars, and Katy Land singing her heart out in black pants with rhinestone glitters. No need to hurry to Cracker Fire's, Skip decided, everybody was here. So, he leaned against the wall by the jukebox and stared over the clot of dancers, listening to Katy Land sing and the steel cry under the player's hands. How Skip had learned to play: listening to others on the radio and at gigs, learning from their techniques and mistakes, what did and didn't jar passion.

During break, he watched Katy Land mingle with the crowd and laugh and work her way to the bar for some kind of milky concoction in a stemmed glass. He even spied the blonde reporter and the photographer, and a new woman with dark hair, talking to Katy. The photographer got another photo, Skip supposed for the Sunday edition of the Valdosta Democrat.

Would Skip have to wait till tomorrow to learn whether Katy Land would sue? No! Hell, no! He'd find out tonight if he had to follow her home.



He stood through the next round of music, listening, really listening to Katy Land sing, and fell as much in love with her voice as the crowd apparently was. The crowd, maybe listening for the first time because of all the publicity.

"Well," he said to himself, "I be damned!" Thinking, is this what it takes to get some recognition? Some crazy freak accident that gets everybody's attention. He would point out to Katy Land that fact: that if it hadn't been for him, she could be busting a gut singing to her soused regulars for the rest of her life.

During the next break, as he watched Katy work the crowd toward the bar, he made his way from the wall, through a maze of tables, straddling the stool next to where she stood sipping her drink through a straw like a milkshake.

"Well, well, well," she said, in her curdled singing voice, gazing over but not at him as if she'd seen him all along, "if it ain't the goatman."

He smiled, tipped his shaped dove hat.

"What you doing hanging round here?" she said. "Thought you was playing at Cracker Fire's." She turned around, leaning, back against the bar.

"Ain't nobody to play to," he said. "All here. Figgered I might as well join 'em."

"That the truth?" she said, sipping.

"True as I'm blue." He whirled the stool, facing out also.

"What you blue about, goatman?"

"Well, for one, I'm out of a job. For two, I might be sued, lose my goats, you know."



She laughed. "Yeah, I reckon that'd make somebody blue." She sucked at the lees of whiskey and milk on the bottom of the glass.

"Are you?" he asked.

"Am I what?"

"Fixing to sue me."

"I ain't the suing kind," she said, setting the empty glass on the bar and hovering over it with her black suit twinkling. "But if I was, I would."

"You ain't hurt."

She laughed. "I wouldn't let that bunch from the newspaper get wind of that."

He glanced back at the three reporters, seated in one of the booths along the north wall. "That'd be some shit, wouldn't it?"

"Wouldn't it?" She turned. "Well, time to get back to work. Got a request?"

"Yeah."

"Just say it, goatman."

"Don't sue me, and give me back my customers."

"Just one. One request." She twitched all over, bushed red hair torched by candlelight.

"Don't sue me, I reckon."

"Got it."



He sat, relieved again, watching her sidle through the crowd and up on the bandstand, adjusting the pole of the mike out of habit. Then talking into it. "Got a request from a friend of mine. Fellow you might say got me off the ground. Everybody here be my witness, and you folks over there from the VD Times listen up. I ain't gone sue the goatman for my accident yesterday."

Everybody clapped.

She continued. "And I prechate you other folks coming out here, getting me all this publicity. Hear tell they's even a talent scout here from Atlanta, come to hear me sing." She kind of dipped and play-swooned, then stood straight and sober again. "But y'all go on back if you belong at Cracker Fire's. Go on back and listen to the goatman, yonder at the bar. He's liable to starve if you don't.

"Meantime, let's have a little fun here at Mama Mia's. Goatman, get on up here and give this steel player a little break. Let us see what you can do. And you folks from the VD Times, how bout making mention of some talent instead of trouble in your Sunday spread. "