

Song of County Roads

By Ginny Greene

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Dedication

To Larry, who found the
country heart in this city girl.
I get a bit squeamish at times,
but to this day he utters his
refrain, "Yes, it's a dirty
world, but hands wash."

Foreword

Enchanting farms hosted my family while we all grew up together. The farms gathered us in and taught us the lyrics of their Song. These stories wag back and forth between the first in Eastern Washington, and the next in West Texas.

The Cast of Characters, besides myself, are the grandkids:

Punkin, the oldest,
Sweet Pea,
Peanut,
and their mother, Puddin'

Smiley Riley and his mother, Precious
and MyKeeper (a pretty good guy - I think I'll keep him)

My clan approves their pet names. They get to claim it or blame it, depending on whether they want to be the star of the story or pin it on their sisters.

This doesn't even begin to include all the dogs, the barn cats, my goat buddies, the hawk on the telephone pole surveying his kingdom for food, or Lydia the Lady Mockingbird who comes by to chat.

Count in all the critters crawling, stinging, burrowing, nesting, cheeping, and buzzing, who also call our plot of ground home. Together, we sing the Song.

Music of a long dirt road

A life-size ceramic cat was once enough, back in the days before the long dirt road. My Keeper relishes the chance to remind me of that when he sees me knee-deep in critters.

Catching Chickens...

A want ad appeared in the local weekly newspaper: "Chickens for sale." MyKeeper and I were decorating our newly purchased farm with critters, with intentions to fill the empty chicken coop with hens bearing brown eggs. I made the phone call next morning. "We have eight," the lady said.

"Only eight?" I pictured a chicken farm sales counter with dozens of chickens to choose from, and people lined up to purchase their choice of breed. "How many do you need?" she asked.

"Just enough to provide eggs for our family breakfasts and a few desserts."

She said eight hens would pretty much keep a family supplied with eggs. Even over the phone it sounded like she rolled her eyes. Next I asked if they laid brown eggs. She said they were New Hampshires. I mumbled, "Oh...good."

Sensing the hesitation, she caught on quickly. "Yes, they lay brown eggs."

"May I ask what time of day chickens lay their eggs?" My question was to gauge whether there would be eggs for tomorrow's breakfast, or would we need to wait till the next day.

"They're not laying yet," she said. "They're pullets."

This time I had to confess the depth of my ignorance. "What are pullets," I asked, "and do they still lay brown eggs?"

"Pullets are young hens before they start laying."

"Hmmm...not laying yet. I really wanted laying hens."

"These will start laying in two or three months," she said.

When I said maybe I should try to find some that were already mature, she said like as not they would quit laying as soon as I put them in a new home. She told me hens don't like sudden changes. Well, that set me down hard.

"OK," I said, "Can I pick them up in about an hour?"

"Well, yes," she said, "but it might be better to wait till evening. We won't be here, but you can just take them."

"Maybe tomorrow would work better."

"Same situation tomorrow," she said. There was a long perplexed pause (mine), and a quick comprehension (hers).

"It will be easier to catch them in the evening."

"I have to catch them?" Her words bashed my mental image of a nice neat counter over which I would purchase chickens packaged to carry home. I guess this is why my neighbor likes to say I'm on a very long trail to becoming a country girl.

The lady on the phone assured me the chickens wouldn't be hard to catch. "They sleep under the dog house. All you need to do is be there as the sun goes down."

While my head spun, she added, "If they slept outside, you could just pick them up, because chickens can't see in the dark. But you'll have to nab them just before they disappear under the dog house."

(Yes. We caught the chickens. This was much too wild a challenge to pass up.)

Meeting the neighbors...

"No, darlings. No-No-No! We can't keep him!" The girls' hopeful expressions shifted into pouty faces.

We were a new family on a long dirt road in West Texas. We didn't know anyone on our road until the dogs helped us out.

Here's how it happened. A wrinkly black dog trotted by each morning to say hello to our wolfy Maggie and our boxer Gretchen. He never stayed long. He had lots of dogs to greet on his daily morning jog.

Within weeks, his human family acquired a new puppy. The dog didn't change his routine for one minute. He brought puppy along with him. At least as far as our house. And left him here.

His daily route may have been too far for puppy legs, or maybe he thought the little guy would slow him down. It occurred to me that the dog might be jealous of the puppy and wanted him to "get lost."

Or maybe he didn't want any newcomer butting into his life down the road.

All I know is, our dogs were happy to baby-sit. They gathered up the puppy and led it to a safe den. Nothing could have gotten past them. "Aunt Gretchen" and "Aunt Maggie" were guardians, teachers, and nurturers. They made the adoption formal.

We met a few of our near neighbors while trying to find puppy's family.

Meantime, the kids named him Jake. That was enough to spur me to action. I covered our garbage can with butcher paper and shoved it out to the edge of the road. I wrote a note in big, dark letters... "Your lost puppy?" - and drew an arrow towards our house.

Pretty soon, a man came to the door and said it wasn't his puppy, but he might know whose it was. Now we'd made the acquaintance of one more person who lives on our road. And a bit later we met puppy's family. Nice folks. And they were awfully glad to get their new pet back.

Well, the big dog didn't want to quit his morning routine. And he wasn't into training a puppy. So Jake (his family has a different name for him) ended up at our house again.

Next time was easier, though. I shoved the garbage can out to the road, clothed it in butcher paper, and wrote, "Oh, Sandra..." Several more neighbors stopped by to check on the puppy, and Sandra showed up after work to take Jake home. Our dogs and our kids are still pouting.

The goat whisperer...

From what I've learned about horse whispering, it is patiently devising ways to make the horse do what you want it to do, so that the horse thinks he wants to do it.

Those methods should work for goat handling, too. Right?

In order to make my goats do what I want them to do, I first had to get their attention. The book says grain works. Shake a can with a little grain in it and the goats come running - but not until after they connect the rattling can to tasty treats. This was a hard lesson (for me!) when my new goats escaped to the neighbor's field before we had a chance to get to know each other very well. Goats are the first definition of stubborn. MyKeeper says I'm the second, but I say his dictionary made a mistake.

Texas is the goat capital of the United States. Texans raise meat goats, novelty goats, dairy goats, and fine-haired fiber goats for textiles. Regardless of breed, they must be herded, fed, sheltered, and

nursed. The state's goat owners no doubt possess the largest collective knowledge of goat management, but I learned it all the hard way.

It used to come as a surprise when one of our milkers sent a bucket clattering over the end of the stand, or into my lap. Gradually, I learned to sense the kick coming. I learned to anticipate the trigger before the kick, when the muscles gather for the jerk. Without realizing it, I learned to get inside the goat's head, to be there before she thinks the beastly thought. Goat whispering is a lot more work for me than for the goat.

The does still surprise me at times. They do it by luring me with days of passive sweetness, then overturning the bucket when I least expect it. Anyone who doubts a goat's intent need only notice the impish look in their eyes. I think they are learning more about me than me about them. And it doesn't leave them nearly as exhausted.

Stella is ready to be fed at the stand. She loves to trick me. She plays that docile game to the hilt, then one random day breaks the routine with some capricious twist.

In her caprine silliness tonight, she decides not to put her head in the stanchion. I must thwart the behavior before she "gets my goat." She'll dodge her head to the left and then to the right of the stanchion. If I miss the cues, her next surprise is