

The First Day of Spring
by Lesley L. Smith

On the first day of spring, two of the goats died of heatstroke. Councilman Ivins tried to blame it on me, but Ma stuck up for me.

In his office in City Hall she said to him, "Honestly, George, it was heat stroke. What do you think she did, smothered them with blankets?" Ma had her hands on her hips like she did when she was really mad.

Ivins drew his bushy eyebrows together and leaned menacingly over his desk. "Maybe it's too big a job for a thirteen-year-old."

How dare he! I wasn't a little kid. The reason I'd been having trouble was I had no help or training what with Mrs. Gomez having her baby early and Ben breaking his leg. I started to make a clever retort but Ma silenced me with her prickly look.

"Katie can handle it," Ma said. "Besides, there's no one else. We're stretched too thin as it is." And that was that.

But later when we got back home, Ma was still upset. "Katie, how could you let that happen?" she asked. "It's only the first day of spring. What's going to happen in the middle of summer?"

That was a very good question.

I pondered it that night as I watched Clarice, my pet hedgehog, running around her cage. If only we were more like Clarice, I thought. We could do our work and go to school and stuff at night, and sleep in the root-cellars during the heat of the day.

In the morning, at breakfast, I broached the idea to my folks. It was bad timing on my part though and I should have known better. "So, I, uh, had a thought last night. What if we turned nocturnal like Clarice? We could let the goats out at night, and you guys could do your work then, too. It'd be much cooler."

My Da stopped reading the news on his handheld for a minute and said, "We're not vampires, Katie. What are you thinking?" His tone got stern. "Have you been reading those twen-cen novels instead of doing your lessons again?"

"Honestly, Katie!" Ma said as she threw up her hands. "Don't bother me with your silly ideas in the morning before I've had my coffee." She was always grumpy first thing in the morning--hence my should-have-known-better.

Da looked at her. "I thought I told you we won't be getting any more coffee shipments for a while. The distribution system from Texas finally gave out."

Ma's face fell. She looked almost as bad as the time we learned everyone in Fairplay, the next town over, had died of influenza. Finally, she said, "No more coffee? Seriously?" She sank down at the kitchen table. "So, basically civilization has totally broken down."

I could have told her that. Our town wasn't anything like the stories Ma and Da told about the old days. And it was nothing like the twen-cen novels I liked. Of course, they were fiction, so the twen-cen probably wasn't like them either.

Da pushed his chair back and stood up. "I picked up some chicory at the co-op on my way back from work last night. Why don't I make you some?"

Clearly this was not the time to pursue my idea. Darn it.

I got up and moved back into the shade; it had shifted as I did my lessons on my handheld. I was studying history today--which I hated. Who cared which so-called President bankrupted the old U.S. and

which one started the big war, and all that? It didn't have anything to do with me and my life.

As I wiped the bead of sweat on my forehead, I looked out over the field of goats. Did any of them look too hot? How would I even know?

I decided to forget my lessons and see if my handheld actually had any useful information like how to keep goats from dying of heatstroke.

It turned out it did. If the goats were lying on the ground panting, with their tongues hanging out, or breathing rapidly and shallowly that was supposed to be bad. I went over and checked on the goats. Some of them did seem to be in trouble.

The data recommended cooling them off ASAP. Of course, it didn't say HOW to cool them off. It's not like we had any of those air-conditioners Ma was always reminiscing about. I looked around the parched weed-filled field, and all I had to work with was some shade and the water trough.

So, I herded all the goats that were still on their feet into the shade. Unfortunately, three of them were lying on the ground and wouldn't get up.

Councilman Ivins would be sure to blame me if they died, and I didn't know if Ma would be able to get him off my back again--no matter how prickly she was. He'd give me the lecture on how the goats and their milk products were the only reliable protein source for the town and we'd all die without them. As if I didn't know that!

So, I got the water trough, dragged it over, and dumped the water on the three trouble-makers. Unfortunately, that meant I had to drag the trough back over to the pump and fill it up again.

So, that's how I spent my day: herding and dragging and dumping and pumping. But, I'm proud to say, none of the goats died on the second day of spring.

At dinner, I was exhausted.

Of course, Da asked me how my history lessons had gone--the lessons I hadn't done.

I said, "Good. I'm all historied up. Thanks for asking," and filled my mouth up with salad. Ma didn't like me to talk with my mouth full.

She said, "So, no more of the goats died, did they, Katie?"

I shook my head.

Da smiled. "Don't worry, Ivins would've let us know if they had."

"I guess yesterday was just a fluke," Ma said.

Yeah, if by fluke she meant business as usual. I shoved my chair back and jumped up. "Do you have any idea how hard I worked today to make sure the goats didn't die?"

I turned to Da. "I didn't have time to do the stupid history lessons. I spent the entire day saving the goats from heatstroke." I shoved my handheld at them. "And I may not be an important grown-up, but I can look at temperature data and make a plot!"

Ma took my handheld. "Nice plot: local temperature trend over the last hundred years." She looked at me. "Obviously, you haven't been slacking off on your math lessons."

"You're missing the point!" I said. "It's hot and it's getting hotter! And I can't save the goats and the town by myself. We have to do something."

Da glanced at the screen, frowning.

They still didn't understand. "Don't you get it? The world you grew up with that had air-conditioners and trucks and coffee and medicine and history lessons is gone! It's over and done with!"

Ma and Da's mouths hung open. They were looking at me like they'd never seen me before.

"It's a new world," I said. "If we don't adapt we will all die, like poor Fairplay. Like those two goats yesterday. Is that what you want?"

Ma was the first to recover. "Of course we don't want that."

"Young lady, don't raise your voice to us," Da said. "We are still your parents and you will treat us with respect." He paused. "We knew; we just didn't know you knew. But it sounds like you've given this matter some thought. Sit down and we will have a reasonable conversation."

I sat down and had the first discussion with my folks where they treated me like a grown-up. They actually listened to what I had to say. We decided to bring my idea of a nocturnal town to the city council meeting the next night. And I was going to present it.

Before the meeting, I should have been a bundle of nerves, but I wasn't. I knew my world was not the world of my parents and the rest of the grownups and it was time they all faced it.

At City Hall, they actually had the meeting upstairs, not in the basement. I was betting that was Ivins idea. It was cooler now that the sun had gone down, but the huge crowd that had shown up was still sweating up a storm. The orangish glow of the solar lights reflected off their sweat.

After we sat through a bunch of boring talk, and Ivins glaring at me when they discussed the goat situation, the City Council finally opened up the floor for new business.

I raised my hand.

Councilman Ivins frowned. I knew he didn't want to call on me but the rules said he had to. "Yes, Katie. Did you have some new business?"

I nodded and stood up. "I do. I propose that the town of Willowmist become nocturnal from the vernal equinox to the autumnal equinox."

Councilman Ivins snorted. His eyebrows looked like cavorting caterpillars. "What kind of silly kid idea is this?"

Ma said, "Hear her out, Ivins."

A bunch of folks in the audience nodded in agreement. Ma and Da had been talking to people about my idea all day--politicking, they called it. Unfortunately, I had been stuck taking care of the goats.

I continued. "As you all know two goats died on the first day of spring. They died of heat stroke. They will be the first of many if we don't make a change. And I don't have to tell you, if the goats go, we all go." I glanced at Councilman Ivins and his eyebrows. He'd said the same thing to me once, so he couldn't object to that!

"If we all work and study and everything during the night--including letting the goats out--and sleep during the day, we won't die of heatstroke," I said.

The people in the audience were nodding and even some of the council members were.

I lifted up my handheld. "I sent you all my plot of local temperature trend. It hotter now than it's been in the last century. And it's only going to get hotter."

Councilman Ivins shook his head. "You don't know what will happen in the future. No one does."

"Sure we do," I said. "We know why it's hotter. Even the scientists of the twen-cen knew about global warming. The regular people just didn't believe them. The carbon dioxide they put in the atmosphere is stuck there, heating us up. And we can't get rid of it." I'd made my case.

Ma smiled at me as she caught my eye. "Good job," she mouthed.

"Even if that were true," Councilman Ivins said, "we don't have the energy to run the extra lights a nocturnal society would require." He just didn't like the idea because it was mine.

"Seriously?" I said, pointing at the solar lights around the room. They were powered by solar panels up on the roof, and I knew the town had plenty.

A few people in the audience chuckled.

The council put my motion to a vote and it passed! Willowmist was going to go nocturnal!

After I got ready for bed, I was feeling pretty proud of myself for saving the town as I watched Clarice.

My parents came in to say goodnight.

"Congratulations, Katie," Ma said. "You did a great job."

I beamed. "Thanks, Ma."

"Yes, very nice job, Katie," Da said.

"Thanks." Hurray for me.

Something was bothering me a little though. "How come I could figure out we were in trouble when none of you grownups could?"

Ma and Da exchanged a look.

Ma said, "Most of us did know we were in trouble; we just didn't know what to do about it. A few older people, like Ivins, were just in denial."

I deflated a bit. They knew?

"Actually, some people were advocating that we abandon the town and move up higher into the mountains," Da said.

"Really? Abandon the town?" I didn't like the sound of that. "So, what we'd live in tents and stuff?"

Da nodded. "Yeah. It wasn't a popular idea. But we didn't have anything else--until you came up with your idea. At first it seemed silly, but that was just because it was so creative." He grinned at me.

"Yes," Ma said. "It was brilliant. How did you come up with it?"

I glanced at Clarice, frolicking about in her dark cage. "I guess I'm just brilliant."

They chuckled. "I guess so," Ma said.

They bid me goodnight.

As Da turned out the light he said, "Now that we've got this all straightened out, and the goats will be less trouble, you can go back to concentrating on your lessons, including your history lessons." He smiled gently as he started to close the door. "Katie, those who are ignorant about the past are doomed to repeat it. History lessons will always be important in this house."

Darn it!