

JULBOCKEN

A solstice story

An improvisation based on an idea shared with us by Delia Robinson.

By Sam and Katah, Montréal 2004

The painter stands before the wall, pacing back and forth along the paint table starting up the scaffolding, stopping and looking again at the paint table, running his eyes over the bright pigments, and continues climbing. A narrow tall wall, lighted from the sides high up, just what one would expect in an abandoned church. The image, a world tree; roots in the ground, massive green trunk, branches in the heavens, a naked woman, red, holding her breasts, as milk pours from her nipples, a blue goat with silver bells tied between its horns, and wreaths of flowers around his neck.

Near the paint table a computer is set up and a woman works the keyboard. "Ah, here is one", she call up to the painter, "a fourteen meter high goat made of straw."

Pyotor is something of an old goat himself, goateed as he is, sensitive and spontaneous, "capricious", his critics would say, "cabrone" the latins call him, big eyed, hard headed, randy. The man, the painter, is known as a fortuneteller and he works especially with barnyard fowl; hens and roosters, turkeys and ducks, and geese. On occasion he will throw corn on the snow and toss his favorite hen to pick it up, then read the fortune of his client in the pattern of the hens' tracks in the fresh snow. One of his favorite tricks is to make ducks appear in a womans' bag, or under her skirt, or inside her blouse. He will throw turkey bones to know a mans' health and pass eggs over a persons' aura, to cleanse it. He studies goose livers, and on occasion sacrifices chickens to tell a supplicants fortune.

His wife Katarina is a cyborg, a world watcher, playful, connected, in touch, aware, and active. Truly a live wire. Marshall Mcluhan's daughter, Donna Haraways' sister. She is half his age, he is twice her age, different cultures different languages, different genders, different technologies, they are perfect for one another.

They are followers of the ancient religion of Zoroaster, fire worshippers, they believe in fire; fire ritual, fire cleanses, fire is the beginning and fire the end, fire of the sun, fire of birth, fire of death.

They were married on the solstice. For Katarina and Pyotor the winter solstice is a rich and creative time. They are full of ideas and projects; they have guests and give dinners. They make their plans for the coming year on this longest night of the year. Candle light, Jamaican rum, down blankets, cold snowy vistas. Just the time of year they love. Decked out in their hats and boots, mittened and scarfed, they march all over the city, in the middle of the night, sensing the coming of the New Year.

Katarina has barely discovered the Great Solstice Goat when she receives a message from Britta at the tourist office in Gävle, Britta, Granddaughter of the first great goat builder.

“Hello Pyotor and Katarina, a friend sent me to your web page showing your fascinating fire rituals. I thought you might be interested in the following: The Gävle Goat began in 1966. My great grandfather, named Stig Gavlén, came up with the idea of making a giant version of the traditional Swedish Yule goat of straw and placing it on (Slottstorget) Castle Square in central Gävle. On 1 December the 13-metre tall, 7-metre long, 3 tonne goat stood on the square. At the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, the goat went up in smoke. The arsonist was found and charged with vandalism. I will tell you in private, although the builder of the goat was my great Grandfather, the destroyer was his son, my Grandfather. He was 18 at the time and quite drunk.

However in the last decades the ritual has been taken over by preservationists, as if it was a folk tradition that needed to be preserved, rather than one that exists. I mean, the confusion is, that they insist on preserving the goat, not the ritual. They forgo the moment when the shortest day turns toward the longest and simply save the sculpture of the goat. The stultifiers are the people from Historic Preservation and the fire department, the museum types and the Arts Council. There are those who say it is sacrilegious to sacrifice the goat.

I am dreaming every night of my grandfather and I have decided I must carry out the ancient ritual..

Will you come here and help me?

Most sincerely, Britta G.

GÄVLE TOURIST INFORMATION

-----Ursprungligt meddelande-----

Skickat: den 16 december 2004 14:01

Till: Turistbyran

Ämne: Yulbocken

Katarina understood and felt right away the power of the contradiction... the town had no intention of burning the goat at the prescribed moment, the winter Solstice.

The goat first appeared on their monitors in mid December, just days days before the Solstice. There were two fixed cameras watching the goat twenty-four hours a day. The goat is fourteen meters high and made of hay. Festooned with red ribbons, lighted by arches of electric light, as it is mostly dark in Sweden at this time of year.

Was this the ritual solstice goat they were observing on their monitor? The ancient sacrificial goat that humanity offered up on this occasion; the longest night of the year, in hopes of turning the course of the winter and making the days longer from this night on? Would burning this goat bring back the Sun?

It took some time for the image to clarify itself, for them to realize what they were seeing. Had they tuned in an ancient time and an ancient ritual? No. This grand goat was standing in Gavle, Sweden just a few hundred kilometers away and it had been built by people of this time, 2004 and this place, just above the 60th parallel, and 17 degrees east of Greenwich, a couple hours north of Stockholm. But to their eyes it was clearly the sacrificial goat. They felt that burning this goat was the only appropriate way to end this year. 2004 had been an horrific year.

Pyotor hung a goat mask in the center of the old church, Katarina put the map of Europe on the floor, they danced together, they played goat, she butted him, he butted her. She pulled his beard and he chased her, he slapped her rump and she chased him. They went head to head, locked horns and circled, looking down on the map.

Katarina inquired of other cyborgs and shared these responses with Pyotor

-puzzled as to why the burning of the Yulbocken isn't a scheduled part of its life cycle,

- It would be better, less adversarial, more fun, and more meaningful, if they burned the goat on the Solstice

- Too weird to have it burned by pranksters.

- So clearly it is MEANT for burning.

- Anyone, arsonist or not, can see that.

And this last, “Headed for Mirabel, must be there for the ceremony, Celia.”

Katarina puts down the sheaf of messages and looking at Pyotor says, “We can be there in two days, let’s go”.

Backpacks, tooth brushes, laptops. It takes a few hours in the workshop for Katarina to rig up the hidden video camera in the fire extinguisher, which they will use to establish an alternate web presence.

They head for the train, goat masks, rattles, drums, sage bundles.

Running back for cameras and extra batteries and battery chargers.

Don’t forget the tapes and film...

They are traveling along the 60th parallel, on the edge the highest quarter of the globe. Most of the time it is dark, around eleven in the morning it starts to get light and there are a few glorious hours of sun till two in the afternoon but by three it is dark again. These are the darkest days of the year and each day darker than the last. They cross the border into Finland at Virglahti, just at midnight they reach the central station at Helsinki, train service is finished till morning, the station is closing.

Katarina knows a cyber café on a back street in Helsinki, one called Yssdragil, the world tree, that is open all the time, with the best computers and plush chairs, with head rests and seats that vibrate. Valhalla is large; there are two floors in an old warehouse. Denizens of deep cyber stay inside for a week at a time. Circles of light, pulsing green and blue, indicate the way from circuit to circuit. The guide, who accompanies them to their workstations, wears high leather boots and a short metallic skirt with a golden halter and a silver mail vest. Her head is crowned with bright orange hair sticking straight out. Hoops and rings dangle from her ears and nose. A silver stud tips her tongue. Earphones and microphones, and various transmitters are clipped or clamped to appropriate parts of her body. Pyotor looks closely at what appears to be a small blue vibrator hung on a chord around her neck.

Each computer station is enclosed by a transparent, colored, plastic, capsule and offers multiple monitors, printers for hard copies, personal sound, computer postage and slots for snail mail. Before she leaves their guide hands them a sustenance menu of vodka or soma or marijuana, borscht and black-bread, health and power drinks.

Katarina goes to one booth and Pyotor to another, they immediately link their two computers, enjoying a bit of cyber eroticism, frolicking goats, loving humans, XOXOXO, as they bring the goat up on their screens, upload their mailing programs and begin notifying their world wide cyber net of the Solstice event they are imagining.

By the time they walk out of Yssdragil, it is nine in the morning, the first quarter moon hangs on the horizon, the sky is still as dark as midnight. On the train to the ferry terminal at Turku, they decide they want to reach Gavle by water, so they continue, by train, north from Turku to Kaskinen another three hundred kilometers. They catch the last ferry, across the Baltic, from Kaskinen to Gavle. They hire a little cabin with a double bed and curl up together for a well-deserved night's rest.

Katarina and Pyotor both dream of the sacrificial goat.

On December 18 at seven AM they are standing in the bow of the Polstjärnan (North Star). The air smells of diesel fuel and they can feel the vibration of the engines through the steel deck. Their bodies pressed together, against the chill morning air, they observe the lights of Gavle in the distance. By nine a.m., it is still dark as pitch, the two Russian fire worshippers are walking along the waterfront in Gavle, Sweden, just a few blocks from the sacred goat.

Looking like tourists, hand in hand, they walk over the hill to the public square where the goat stands, fourteen meters high, the goat is an awesome sight, electrically lighted from above and below, belted and decorated with bright red bands of rayon, fenced for its own protection and watched by two video cameras.

Pyotor blocks one camera, the goat as though he is cooperating and happy to see them, blocks the other, while Katarina slips over the fence and exchanges the red fire extinguisher, standing next to the goat, for the false one they brought with them. The false extinguisher contains their own satellite-linked cam-corder.

Not wanting to be noticed, they bow to the goat and leave the area, almost immediately...

Pyotor, is looking for an ally, he scrutinizes everyone and all the buildings and signs, hoping to see the builder of the great goat or some people who know the rites of the goat. They walk slowly up and down the side streets sensing, searching.

At the sign of the Rampant Goat the Gavle cyber café, they take heart and enter the fray. Britta recognizes them, she and her friends, two handsome young men in Viking costumes, with leather skirts and hairy legs, are waiting for them and there is an American woman, Celia Nightingale, bright eyed, sixtyish, a winning smile and perfectly white hair, clipped to look like a helmet. She reminds them of the winged messenger on the American dime, Mercury. Katarina remembers her message, nonetheless, they are surprised to see her.

Katarina and Pyotor and Britta hug and the Russians say, "We have come to witness your burning of the Julbocken". The American woman gleefully applauds

the embrace, and introduced herself as an artist who has been watching the goat in cyber for some years and has come to Gavle this year to participate in the Saturnalia and to write about it. The two very broad Vikings take this opportunity to hug Celia again and say, “mer bakelse!” , which means, more pastry! There is a faint ring of sugar around Celia’s lips and the Vikings are regaling her with their friendliest smiles.

After a brief round of greetings, these things are often awkward for cyborgs, who know each other as bodiless entities, they head for their keyboards. The Rampant Goat is served by these Viking friends of Brittas, dressed in skins with hide and bone paraphernalia, helmets, swords and daggers, and various digital hookups. The booths look like old fashioned hair driers, however when the shell is lowered it comes completely over the operators head and the key board swings around to be at his fingertips. The seat rises a few inches, and begins to turn, slowly, clockwise, and one has a tangible sensation of encountering the surging, pulsing, world wide web. These are the fastest computers, with visual and audio hook ups, so when applicable, one can speak to and see the communicants in the other cyber realms. The operator faces eight screens at once, with an ocular device that fits right on the bridge of ones nose and allows you to keep the whole array of info in order with a wiggle of the nose, or a blink of the eye. It takes a little getting used to, at first, a flutter of eye lashes will send the inexperienced user around the world in a series of, speed of light, flashes. Some times newcomers will become disoriented and jump up, banging their heads, or come staggering out of the shells completely disoriented. To prevent accidents, bruises and misfortunes the Vikings offer a nerve calming, amphetamine like, drug to the new users.

Celia, giggles as she pops a hand full of pink and blue capsules. Pyotor and Katarina refuse the drugs, they need to keep their heads clear. Katarina has a new fractal mailing program, that promises to keep extending on it’s own.

The idea is to convene a circle of celebrants, who will participate in the burning of the goat, from every corner of the round earth. The six of them begin to send out the web pages, showing images from the two Gavle cam corders and the new video camera hidden in the fire extinguisher.

The web addresses are accompanied by an invitation to participate in the sacrifice of the Solstice goat, on the Solstice, in Gavel, Sweden. A virtual ritual, a world wide ritual circle, of tuned-in beings who will experience the ritual sacrifice over the entire surface of the earth. They write to the Astronomer in Chile and the Poet in Brazil, the Chemist in Equador, the Naturalist in New Mexico, the Dancer in Mexico City, the sculptress in Vermont, the Puppeteers in Vietnam, the Sadhu in Bombay, the Engineer in Baden, the Doctor in Rwanda. Katarina’s fractal mailing program engages and they watch as an ever expanding, bifurcating, diversifying and multiplying list and thread of addresses and contacts and people unfolds on their screens.

On the 21st the city is full of parties and revelers. On solstice night, the six go from one party to another, joining in when they can, singing the solstice songs, accepting the baked treats in the shape of goats heads, from the old people. At one home there appears to be a funeral in progress, with a candle lit coffin in the center and the celebrants filing up to the coffin and kissing the corpse. Kissing the corpse of the year gone by and dancing to the tunes of the year to come. The night is full of Yule logs, animal masks, bearded men in dresses, brass instruments, parading, dancing, singing in the spirit of dispelling the darkness.

They met more than one festive party on the streets singing and dancing from house to house, wearing their goat masks, carrying a smiling child on a puppet horse. Or another group playing clarinets to a spinning sun, mounted on a decorated pole. It seemed likely to our company that, one of these reveling parties, might ignite the goat themselves. Britta whispered to Katarina, "They all seem to be under the spell of the preservationists, and walk around the great Julbocken as if they do not see it."

Around one in the morning Britta's guests returned to the Rampant Goat and made a plan...

Celia Nightingale caught up in the excitement of the moment talked ceaselessly, she realized the time had come and they were going to act. They might get arrested, she checked for her passport half a dozen times. She suggested a million different ways of starting the fire and escaping. One scenario after another, without pausing, she listed possible ignitions and possible escapes in great detail. The Vikings loved this poring forth of ideas and sat quite close to her smiling and nodding. Listening to her continuous stream of inventions their eyes began to glaze over and the warmth of the cyber café threatened to put them to sleep.

Just as Katarina was starting to sink into a hypnotic trance there was a muffled quacking sound, Celia looked alarmed, her eyes got very big and her mouth sprung open, she threw her hands up to her breast, glanced to her left and to her right, and ran to the bathroom. Katarina looked at Pyotor, smiling at the twinkle in his eye. She took the opportunity to ask Britta for a bow and arrow. Britta asked the Vikings if they had a bow and arrow, and they produced a number of bows and a quiver full of arrows. By the time Celia came back from the bathroom, cradling a wild-duck between her palms, Britta was putting on her black and orange ski jacket and they were all getting dressed to go out.

Britta led the way along the edge of the city, by now it was after two in the morning, and before long they arrived at the goat. Pyotor got out his goat mask and drum. Placing the goat mask on his head he brayed like a buck, beat the drum and pointed his feet like a goat and pawed the ground.

The Vikings covered the cameras of the police. Katarina, using her palm pilot, sent out one last timing notice, to the goat watchers around the world. The Vikings blew the conch to the four directions.

Under the shadows of the trees, Pyotor, Celia and the Vikings formed a circle and began to sing the old songs and dance the old dances.

Britta threw back her hood, took off her gloves, put the notch to the string and holding the bow flat, with the arrow resting across it, extended the prepared tip to Katarina. Pyotor stepped forward and sprayed the tip with a mist of Vodka from his mouth. Katarina lit the torch. Britta pulled the bow back, the string to her cheek, the flaming tip to her extended hand.

The Vikings started sending up a battery of fire works. Whoosh , whistle, boom with a golden flash.

The arrow arc-ed beautifully from the bus stop across the fence to the goats fore shoulder, the tip was buried in the straw and at first they saw only a stream of smoke rise from the wound. They held their breaths till the fire started. More smoke and yellow flames, what a blaze, the fire leapt into the night sky and the dancers leapt with it. The fire raged up and down the fourteen meters of straw, consuming the Julbocken. The heat warmed them even across the street.

Pyotor began telling the Vikings' fortunes, they knew that fortunes would be told and they offered their hands. Pyotor, still in his goat mask, holds Celia's hands and says; "You are a brave artist you will live a life of the heart, your art will be known to all the northern people".

Katarina crosses the street and slips over the fence, close to the fire she takes a small box from her jacket and collects ash from the fire, ash which she will carry during the new year as a talisman.

The police sirens can barely be heard in the distance, the Vikings turn their backs to Celia and put their hands on their knees, she thwacks their broad backs hard with a bundle of hazel branches. Celia is laughing and raising her bundle of branches and smacking the backs of the Vikings. She hits one and then turns around and smacks the other. Everyone is shouting : Na Shchestia, na zdravia, na tot Noviy Reek, which means, happiness and health in the coming year.

When the police car head lights are visible Brittas' friends start to pack up in the midst of a round of hugs and congratulations and good wishes. The masks, the drums the video camera, go into the pack packs.

Celia Nightingale reaches over and takes the bow from Britta. "This is a part I want to play. For my story you know." she says, and holding the bow in front of her she walks toward the police cars, the ducks head just sticking out of the

pocket of her anorak, while the rest of the company moves over the hill into the shadows.

By the time Pyotor and Katarina reach Yssdragil, the cyber news flashes pixels of Celia in the clutches of the Gavle police. Celia is smiling, the police are not.

By the time Katarina has her computers warmed up and Pyotor is back to his mural, the news is that Celia Nightingale has been released, after a march and demonstration by gallery owners and curators from all over Sweden.. It seems they want to buy her artwork. It will not be long till her pictures of the Julbocken, and the Vikings and the two women archers and the Shaman, her pictures of the ritual goat and the people of the ritual circle are known all over the northern world.

Sam and Katah ... New Year's 2005 ...
Thanks to Delia Robinson for the Julbocken.

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performed on New Year's Eve 2005 ---Montréal

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image of the burning goat, Gavle Sweden, December 2004

http://epi.gavle.se/gk/t_engelsk.asp?id=8682