

## Milking Lesson

By Esther Aardsma

I skip across the gravel driveway next to my eldest sister, Leanna, as she walks to the barn. Today I am finally big enough to start learning how to milk our goats! The stainless-steel milk pail I am carrying in my right hand bumps my knee, and I pause in my skipping to rub the sore spot before running to catch up to Leanna.

"I'm sure I can do it," I say, breathless. "I'm going to milk a whole goat!"

"Uh-huh." She looks sideways down at me, raising her eyebrow, mouth caught halfway between a smile and a frown. "It's harder than it looks."

*Mirroww.* Prince, the black-and-white tomcat, slips out of the crooked crack between the barn doors and arches his back while rubbing his soft, shiny body along my leg. Leanna sets down one of her own silver buckets to shove aside the heavy sliding door. The goats hear us, and they start bleating in their pens—the dams to be fed and milked, the kids to be let back in with their mommies. Blinking as our eyes adjust in the dimness, Leanna and I bring our load of buckets and lids and filters into the milkroom and set them on the counter. "Okay, kiddo, you take that scoop"—Leanna indicates a tin can rusted to red-orange—"and put two scoops of grain in each feeder." As I eagerly follow her instructions, Leanna turns and crosses through the doorway to the does' pen. She lifts the chain from the gate and lets out three does who promptly barge through the milkroom door, each fighting and shoving to reach their grain before the others. The does hop up on the three stanchions, burying their noses in the sweet feed and gobbling greedily, eyes busily watching their competitors' movements in case someone decides the feed on the other side of the milkroom tastes better.

I climb on each stanchion, closing the headlocks and clipping each hook into place. Leanna is already at the first goat's side, washing Providence's pink udder and drying it with paper towels, then rapidly zinging white streams of creamy liquid into the bottom of the pail. After a few moments, the zings becomes swishes as the bottom of the pail begins to fill with froth. I sit on the stanchion opposite Leanna and watch her sink into a musical rhythm, my head leaning against the warm goat waiting to be milked, my fingers stroking Prince's head, back, tail, then head again as he arches and circles under my hand. He is purring so loudly I can not only hear it, but I also feel it under my hand. "Such a funny sound," I say. I try to copy his purring, my lips ticklishly buzzing. "How do cats purr?"

Leanna stands and pours Providence's milk carefully through the filter into the holding pail. "I don't really know," she says. "It is funny how they can purr without moving their mouth. We can't do that!"

She quickly preps Integrity, then sits down next to the old Saanen. Milk starts zinging again, Leanna's head resting on the goat's white side. "I wonder where Diamond is," my sister says.

A speckled paw appears through the crack by the almost-closed milkroom door, gropes around for a second, retracts, and then reappears. "She's so silly," I giggle. A second paw appears, then a nose pushes into the crack, and the door creaks open enough for the long-haired tortoiseshell tabby's head to appear. "There you are!" says Leanna. "You must have slept in this morning."

Diamond hops lightly over the high threshold, then sits daintily and begins licking her coat, pausing her bath periodically to fix her liquid gaze on Leanna. My sister rolls her eyes. "You guys are terrible beggars," she says, then looks at me. "Why don't you find their dish?"

Seeming to sense my purpose, the two cats cluster around me while I search the milkroom for the gray chewed-on cat dish. I find it under one of the stanchions, shake some spilled grain out of it, and hold it out to Leanna. She smiles as she rises to pour Integrity's milk into the holding pail. "I think it's about your turn to milk!"

Leanna frowns at the now-empty feeder bin at the front of the third stanchion before sitting down to prep Patience. Patience, nose now unoccupied, nibbles on Leanna's hair and snorts. "Why don't you give her another can of feed first?" Leanna sighs.

Patience's extra can of sweet feed disappearing rapidly, I sit down in front of my big sister, reaching out my arms to imitate her bigger ones around me. "Okay, so you make a circle of your top fingers, so that the milk can't go back up. And then you slowly tighten the rest of your fingers so that the milk goes down and comes out, see?" A squirt of milk lands in the cat dish. At the sound, Prince puts his paws on the stanchion and peers up over the edge.

I imitate Leanna's motion, but I only manage to get a single drop.

"No, don't pull." Leanna shows me again, slowly. "You have to get the order of your fingers right for it to work." Another stream of milk squirts into the cat dish.

I bite my lip and carefully follow her instructions. Some milk squirts into the dish. "I did it!" I squeeze again, a thin stream of milk missing the cat dish and puddling on the stanchion. "Oops."

*Mrraow.* Prince licks his lips. I laugh. "He really wants his milk," I say.

Leanna laughs. "Yes, he does. Watch this." She angles Patience's teat toward the cat and squirts a little bit of milk in his direction. He jumps back, then opens his mouth and begins lapping at the stream of milk spraying directly into his mouth. I giggle.

Diamond's speckled face appears at the back of the stanchion, then she creeps toward the cat dish. Her long, perfectly groomed whiskers brush against Patience's white hind leg. The goat startles and then kicks toward Diamond, her hoof knocking over the cat dish and splashing the milk onto the stanchion. Unhurt by either Patience's kicking or her wicked glare in the cats' direction before snorting and burying her nose back into her feed bin, Diamond and Prince busily lick the spilled milk off the side of the stanchion before it can drip to the floor.

"Okay, I'm going to finish up with Patience before she gets too crabby." Leanna slips her pail between Patience's back legs. A steady swish-swish-swish begins.

I move to sit on the edge of the pallet the sweet feed cans rest on. Prince, licking the last of the spilled milk from his whiskers, dances over to me and begins to rub and circle again, purring proudly. He pushes his cheeks against my hand, begging me to pet his ears and throat, even rolling on the dirty floor to expose his tummy for my rubbing. Diamond moves a little closer, accepting a couple strokes from me before settling a couple feet away to wash her face and paws.

"Why is his name Prince?" I suddenly ask. I trace the tom's black and white splotches.

"What? Oh, I suppose it's because he's so handsome. He's like a cat prince."

I absorb that for a moment. "And why Diamond? She doesn't have a diamond shape on her."

"Well, probably because she's precious and pretty like a diamond, you know, in a ring. And she kind of does have a tiny little diamond in that orange on her face."

"So it's like she's the princess wearing a diamond, and he's the prince?"

"Yeah, I s'pose so."

"They're my bestest friends."

Leanna smiles as she pours her full bucket into the holding pail again. "Yeah, they're good kitties. Let's get the next batch of milkers in here."

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with

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