

Teffi

Lifeless Beast

THE CHRISTMAS PARTY WAS FUN. THERE WERE CROWDS OF GUESTS, BIG and small. There was even one boy who had been flogged that day—so Katya’s nanny told her in a whisper. This was so intriguing that Katya barely left the boy’s side all evening; she kept thinking he would say something special, and she watched him with respect and even fear. But the flogged boy behaved in the most ordinary manner; he kept begging for gingerbread, blowing a toy trumpet, and pulling crackers. In the end, bitter though this was for her, Katya had to admit defeat and move away from the boy.

The evening was already drawing to a close, and the very smallest, loudly howling children were being got ready to go home, when Katya was given her main present—a large woolly ram. He was all soft, with a long, meek face and eyes that were quite human. He smelt of sour wool, and if you pulled his head down he bleated affectionately and persistently: “Ba-a-a!”

Katya was so struck by the ram, by the way he looked, smelt, and talked, that she even, to ease her conscience, asked, “Mama, are you sure he’s not alive?”

Her mother turned her little birdlike face away and said nothing; she had long ago stopped answering Katya’s questions, she never had time. Katya sighed and went to the dining room to give the ram some milk. She stuck the ram’s face right into the milk jug, wetting it right up to the eyes. Then a young lady she didn’t know came up to her, shaking her head: “Oh, dearie me, what *are* you doing? Really, giving living milk to a creature that isn’t alive! It’ll be the end of him. You need to give him pretend milk. Like this.”

She scooped up some air in an empty cup, held it to the ram’s mouth, and smacked her lips.

“See?”

“Yes. But why does a cat get real milk?”

“That’s just the way it is. Each according to its own. Live milk for the living. Pretend milk for the unliving.”

The woolen ram at once made his home in the nursery, in the corner, behind Nanny’s trunk. Katya loved him, and because of her love he got grubbier by the day. His fur got all clumpy and knotted and his affectionate “Ba-a” became quieter and quieter. And because he was so very grubby, Mama would no longer allow him to sit with Katya at lunch.

Lunchtimes became very gloomy. Papa didn’t say anything; Mama didn’t say anything. Nobody even looked round when, after eating her pastry, Katya curtseyed and said, in the thin little voice of a clever little girl, “*Merci, Papà! Merci, Mamà!*”

Once they began lunch without Mama being there at all; by the time she got back, they had already finished their soup. Mama shouted out from the hall that there had been an awful lot of people at the skating rink. But when she came to the table, Papa took one look at her, then hurled a decanter down onto the floor.

“Why did you do that?” shouted Mama.

“Why’s your blouse undone at the back?” shouted Papa.

He shouted something else, too, but Nanny snatched Katya from her chair and dragged her off to the nursery.

After that there were many days when Katya didn’t so much as glimpse Papa or Mama; nothing in her life seemed real any longer. She was having the same lunch as the servants—it was brought up from the kitchen. The cook would come in and start whispering to Nanny, “And he said . . . and then she said . . . And as for you! . . . You’ve got to go! And *he* said . . . And then *she* said . . .”

There was no end to this whispering.

Old women with foxy faces began coming in from the kitchen, winking at Katya, asking Nanny questions, whispering, murmuring, hissing: “And then he said . . . You’ve got to go! And she said . . .”

Nanny often disappeared completely. Then the foxy women would make their way into the nursery, poking around in corners, and wagging their knobby fingers at Katya.

But when they weren’t there it was even worse. It was terrifying.

Going into the big rooms was out of the question: they were empty and echoing. The door curtains billowed; the clock over the fireplace ticked on severely. And there was no getting away from the endless “And *he* said . . . And then *she* said . . .”

The corners of the nursery started to get dark before lunch. They seemed to be moving. And the little stove—the big stove’s daughter—crackled away in the corner. She kept clicking her damper, baring her red teeth, and gobbling up firewood. You couldn’t go near her. She was vicious. Once she bit Katya’s finger. No, you wouldn’t catch Katya going near that little stove again.

Everything was agitated; everything was different.

The only safe place was behind the trunk—the home of the woolen ram, the lifeless beast. The ram lived on pencils, old ribbons, Nanny’s glasses—whatever the good Lord sent his way. He always looked at Katya with gentle affection. He never made any complaints or reproaches and he understood everything.

Once Katya was very naughty—and the ram joined in, too. He was looking the other way, but she could see he was laughing. Another time, when he was ill and Katya bandaged his neck with an old rag, he looked so pitiful that Katya quietly began to cry.

It was worst of all at night. There was scampering and squealing everywhere, all kinds of commotion. Katya kept waking up and calling out.

“Shh!” said Nanny, when she came in. “Go back to sleep! It’s only rats. But you watch out—or they’ll bite your nose off!”

Katya would draw the blanket over her head. She would think about the

woolen ram, and when she sensed him there, dear and lifeless, she would fall asleep peacefully.

One morning she and the ram were looking out of the window when they suddenly saw someone brown and hairless trotting across the yard. He looked like a cat, only he had a very long tail.

“Nanny, Nanny! Look! What a nasty cat!”

Nanny came to the window, too.

“That’s not a cat—it’s a rat! And it’s huge! A rat like that could make mincemeat of any cat. Yes, some rat!”

She spat out the last word so horribly, grimacing and baring her teeth as if she herself were an old cat, that Katya felt frightened and disgusted. She felt sick to the pit of her stomach.

Meanwhile the rat, belly swaying, trotted up in a businesslike, proprietorial way, to a nearby shed and, crouching down, crawled under a slat and into the cellar.

The cook came in and said there were so many rats now that soon they’d be eating your head off. “Down in the storeroom they’ve gnawed away all the corners of the master’s suitcase. The cheek of them! When I come in they just sit there. They don’t stir an inch.”

In the evening the fox-women came, bringing a bottle of something and some stinking fish. Along with Nanny, they took swigs from the bottle, swallowed down mouthfuls of fish, and then started laughing at something or other.

“You still with that ram of yours?” a rather stout woman asked Katya. “He’s only fit for the knacker’s yard. He’s going bald—and look at that leg of his! It’s hanging on by a thread. I’d say he’s had it.”

“Stop teasing her,” said Nanny. “Don’t pick on a poor orphan!”

“I’m not teasing her. Just telling it the way it is. The stuffing will all fall out and that’ll be the end of him. A live body eats and drinks—and that’s how it stays alive. You can mollycoddle a rag all you like but it’ll always fall apart in the end. Anyway, the girl’s not an orphan. For all we know, her mother drives past the house laughing into her sleeve: *Tee-hee-hee!*”

The women had worked up quite a sweat with laughing so much. Nanny dipped a lump of sugar into her glass and gave it to Katya to suck. The sugar lump clawed at Katya’s throat and there was a ringing in her ears. She tugged at the ram’s head.

“He’s special. I tell you—he really bleats!”

“Tee-hee! You *are* a little silly,” said the stout woman, with more sniggering. “Even a door squeaks if you push it. A real ram squeals all by itself. You don’t need to pull its head.”

The women drank some more and went back to whispering the same old words: “And *he* said . . . You’ve got to go! . . . And then *she* said . . .”

Along with the ram, Katya went behind the trunk in the nursery, to be well and truly miserable.

The ram wasn’t very alive. He was going to die soon. His stuffing would all fall out—and that would be the end of him. If only she could get him to eat—if

only she could find a way to get him to eat even the very littlest of little nibbles.

She took a hard biscuit from the window sill, held it to the ram's mouth, and looked the other way, in case he felt shy. Maybe he would bite a little bit off . . . She waited, then turned round again: no, the biscuit was untouched.

"I'll nibble a little bit off myself. Maybe that'll encourage him."

She bit off a tiny corner, held the biscuit out to the ram again, turned away, and waited. And once again the ram did not touch it.

"No? You can't? You can't 'cause you're not alive?"

And the woolen ram, the lifeless beast, answered with the whole of his meek, sad face, "I can't! I'm not a living beast. I can't!"

"Call out to me then! By yourself! Say 'Ba-a-a!' Go on: 'Ba-a-a!' You can't? You can't?"

And Katya's soul overflowed with pity and love for the poor lifeless one. She went straight to sleep, face pressed to her tear-wet pillow—and found she was walking down a green path, and the ram was running along beside her, nibbling the grass, calling to her, shouting "Ba-a-a!" all by himself and laughing out loud. How strong and healthy he was. Yes, he would outlive the lot of them!

Morning came—dismal, dark, and full of anxiety—and suddenly there was Papa. He was looking gray and angry, his beard all shaggy, and he was scowling like a goat. He poked his hand out so Katya could kiss it, and he told Nanny to tidy everything up because a lady teacher would be coming soon. And off he went.

The next day there was a ring at the front door.

Nanny rushed out. She came back and started bustling around.

"Your teacher's arrived. To look at the face on her, you'd think she was some great dog. Just you wait!"

The teacher clicked her heels together and held out her hand to Katya. She really did look like an intelligent old watchdog; she even had some kind of yellow blotches around her eyes. And she had a way of turning her head very quickly and snapping her teeth, like a dog catching a fly.

She looked round the nursery and said to Nanny, "You're the nanny, are you? I want you to take all these toys, please. Put them somewhere well out of the way, so the child can't see them. All these donkeys and rams have to go. It's important to be scientific and rational about toys. Otherwise we end up with morbidity of imagination and all the damage that ensues from that. Katya, come here!"

From her pocket she took a ball attached to a long rubber string. Snapping her teeth and rotating the ball on the string, she began singing out, "Hop, jump, up and down, bound and bounce! Repeat after me: hop, jump . . . Oh, what a backward child!"

Katya said nothing and smiled forlornly, to keep from crying. Nanny was carrying away the toys, and the ram let out a "Ba-a-a!" in the doorway.

"Pay attention to the surface of this ball! What do you see? You see that it is two-colored. One side is light blue, the other white. Point to the light-blue side. Try to concentrate."

And off she went, holding out her hand to Katya and saying, "Tomorrow

we're going to weave baskets!"

Katya was shaking all evening long. She couldn't eat anything. She was thinking about the ram, but she didn't dare say a word.

"It's hard being lifeless. What can he do? He can't say anything and he can't call out to me. And she said, 'He's got to go!'"

The words "got to go" made her whole soul go cold.

The foxy women came, eating and drinking, whispering, "And *he* said . . . And *she* said . . ."

And again: "Go! Just got to go!"

Katya woke at dawn, feeling a fear and anguish the likes of which she had never known before. It was as if someone had called out to her. She sat up in bed, listening.

"Ba-a-a! Ba-a-a!"

The ram's call was pitiful and insistent. The lifeless beast was shouting.

All cold now, she leapt out of bed, clenching her hands and pressing them to her chest, listening. There it was again:

"Ba-a-a! Ba-a-a!"

From somewhere out in the corridor. He must be out there.

She opened the door.

"Ba-a-a!"

He was in the storeroom.

She pushed the door open. It wasn't locked. It was a dim, murky dawn, but there was enough light to see. The room was full of boxes and bundles.

"Ba-a-a! Ba-a-a!"

Just by the window was a flurry of dark shapes. The ram was over there, too. Something dark jumped out, seized him by the head, and began dragging him along.

"Ba-a-a! Ba-a-a!"

And then—two more of the dark shapes, tearing at his flanks, splitting open his skin.

"Rats!" thought Katya. "Rats!" She remembered how Nanny had bared her teeth. She trembled all over, clenching her fists still tighter. But the ram was no longer shouting. He was no more. A big fat rat was silently dragging some gray scraps of cloth, pulling at some soft bits and pieces, tossing the ram's stuffing about.

Katya hid away in her bed, pulling the blankets up over her head. She didn't say anything and she didn't cry. She was afraid Nanny would wake up, bare her teeth like a cat, and laugh with the foxy women over the woolen death of the lifeless beast.

She went quite silent; she curled up into a little ball. From now on she was going to be a quiet little girl, oh so quiet, so that no one would ever find out.

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—translated from the Russian by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler