

PATRICIA MATTHEWS

GOATMAN

As Moira came to the midpoint of her afternoon walk, the small unpainted cabin of Miss Bessie Rhode, the old woman spoke to her for the first time.

Leaning over the bare, wind-finished boards of her front yard fence, looking for all the world like a scrap of gray cloth hung to dry, the woman uttered the words grudgingly, "Hello, Missy."

Moira supposed that she should feel some sort of triumph at this small victory, but truthfully, she didn't really care. Her brother, Victor, had warned her that the natives would not accept her, and that she shouldn't expect any kind of a welcome if she insisted on intruding her presence into the God-forsaken place; but what he couldn't seem to realize was that this didn't matter. In fact, such a situation was desirable to her, for she wanted nothing so much as to be left alone.

However, it wasn't in her to be really rude, and so she nodded at the other woman's words, and answered with sparse words of her own. "Hello."

As far as she was concerned, this was the end of it. She continued moving up the road, her feet raising the dry dust into the gusts of wind that swooped down from the treetops, and rattled the dry brush along the roadside; but by the way the old woman looked at her, she knew that the episode was not finished.

Despite a vague feeling of disquiet, she stopped. What could this old woman have to say to her? For three weeks Moira had been walking past the cabin every afternoon. Why now was the woman speaking to her?

Miss Rhode cleared her throat. The sound was as dry as her wrinkled face. "I thought you ought to know," she said, fixing Moira with her bright, black eyes. "You being a woman all alone up there, you have a right to know."

Moira found herself coming closer, as the wind blew Miss Rhode's words off into the garden beside the house.

"What?" Moira said. "What should I know?"

". . . Goatman," said the old woman, and Moira came closer still. Had she heard what she thought she had heard? "What?" she asked again.

"It's Goatman," said the old woman, snapping out the words. "He's back again. Been seen around Clarence Hooker's place, and killed a hound up at Carter's. You'd best keep your doors and windows locked, and keep that dog of yours close to the house."

Moira looked down the road in the direction in which Tray had gone running after the rabbit they had startled in the middle of the road.

"Do you have a gun?"

Wordlessly Moira shook her head, and felt the wind wrap her hair around her throat and across her cheeks.

"It wouldn't hurt none to have one," said Miss Rhode, staring fixedly into Moira's eyes. "Just wanted to tell you. Seeing as how you're a woman alone."

Why did she keep harping on that? "You're alone, too," Moira said somewhat accusingly.

What might have been amusement flickered in the old woman's eyes. "That's a different thing," she said, turning away. "I'm an old woman, and I'm no city-folk. I can take care of myself."

Meaning I can't, I suppose, thought Moira, feeling a flash of annoyance.

"Well, thanks for the warning," she called in what she intended to be a sarcastic tone, but the old woman was already walking toward the house, and in a moment, Moira was left alone in the road. * * *

By suppertime, the wind had not lessened, and Moira, preparing her evening meal at the sink in front of the window, could see the tops of the trees at the edge of the clearing, moving against the fading blue of the sky. It was going to be a beautiful, wild night, and for the first time in months, she felt a kind of excitement stirring inside her.

She could feel the warmth of the wood stove behind her, and she turned from the window to face the room. She loved the interior of the one-room cabin. It was simple, and functional, much as it had been when her great-aunt, Ida, had lived here. Victor might scoff at it, as indeed he had, but it satisfied some need in her.

The day after she moved into the cabin, her brother, Victor, had come to see her.

"It looks like something out of one of those awful old movies," Victor said, looking very much out of place in his beige sports outfit, which Moira was certain had been advertised as the latest thing in country wear. He posed in the doorway, looking fastidious and elegant, and suddenly she felt as tired of him as she was of all the rest of the polished, sophisticated, artificial people she had come here to escape.

"You'll be back within a week." His attractive, triangular smile took the sting from his words. "This place is primitive, Moira. A pump! I can't believe it!"

And
where is the john?"

"In back of the cabin." She had to smile at his very real horror.

He struck his forehead with the back of his hand. "A Chic Sale! Now I know you're out of your mind!"

A stricken look flashed across his mobile face, and Moira went to him and took his hand, exerting a gentle pressure. "Victor, it's all right. I can talk about it now. I can talk about nervous breakdowns, mental illness." She smiled wryly.
"In fact, for nine months, it seems I've talked of little else."

And that's the truth, she thought. In her sessions with Dr. Speegler, she had finally been able to bring it all out; all the bitterness, all the repressed love and hidden hatred that she had felt for her husband, Jason. Dr. Speegler had helped her see that her anger was a natural thing. She had felt betrayed, which was only natural, since in the very act of marrying her, Jason had betrayed her.

She had married Jason believing he was everything she had ever dreamed of; handsome, clever, sure of himself. The fact that he attempted no physical liberties with her before marriage, she put down to his self-control, his concern for her inexperience. But, after the wedding . . . She drew a shuddering breath. She could think of it now, even talk about it, but the thought still brought pain. It all came down to one hurtful, unalterable fact; Jason was not able to physically love a woman. That portion of his life was reserved for other men.

No purpose would be served by going over it again; the recrimination, the terrible, wounded silences, the soul and mind-ripping cry of, why? Why did you marry me?

Dr. Speegler had helped her understand it, and deal with it, and now she needed peace, peace and quiet, and isolation, so that she could learn to live with it.

She felt the touch of Victor's hand on her arm. "Moira, are you sure you'll be all right alone? It's like the end of the Earth out here, and the cabin's falling apart. Nobody has lived here since Aunt Ida died."

She smiled, and touched his face. "Dear Victor. Of course. I've always loved it here, you know that. Besides, I have Tray for company."

Of course he had gone away still not understanding, for how could she have explained the appeal that this primitive simplicity had for her. She knew that in his own, rather unsteady way, her brother loved her and worried about her, and she appreciated his caring, but she needed to, had to, be alone just now.

Supper over, and the dishes put away, she put more wood into the Franklin stove, turned up the flame on the kerosene lamp, and settled, with a book, into the old rocker. Tray lay at her feet, rump turned to the heat of the stove, drowsing.

The wind seemed stronger now that darkness had fallen, and Moira was conscious of thumps and scratching sounds, as branches and twigs were blown against the walls of the cabin. She tried to immerse herself in her book, but she found the sounds distracting.

Up until now, she had felt no fear of staying in the cabin alone. Tray was a good watch dog, and somehow it had never occurred to her that there was any reason to be afraid.

Tonight, however, she felt a touch of uneasiness. The sounds of the wind and brush sounded disturbingly like someone, or something, was trying to get into the cabin, and the words of the old woman kept coming back to her.

"Goatman." Who or what was he? Miss Rhode had seemed to assume that she would know. He must be a piece of local legend. Something that everyone in this part of the country knew about. Everyone but her, one of the "city-folk."

She let the book fall to her lap, bemused by the mystery of the name. The old woman had said that she should protect herself, but against what? What kind of danger did this Goatman represent?

She was started from her reverie by Tray's low growl, and found herself sitting upright, grasping the arms of the rocker. Tray was still at her feet, but the hair around his heavy neck was raised, and the low growl continued to rise in his throat.

"What is it, boy? What is it?" she whispered.

Then she noticed the knob on the front door. Slowly, it was moving; turning back and forth. The simple movement was singularly frightening. She felt the hair on her own neck rise, and Tray, thrusting forward with powerful legs, threw himself at the door, barking furiously.

Moira, in her chair, found herself powerless to move. In a few moments, Tray's barks faded to whines, as he paced back and forth before the door, and Moira could see that the knob was no longer moving.

She let out the breath she had not realized that she had been holding, and called to Tray. He came to her side, whining and twisting his body. He wanted her to open the door, to let him go after whoever or whatever had been standing on the other side. She quieted him with words and pats, and in a little while, he seemed to have forgotten their visitor. She wished that it was as easy to quiet her own mind.

The morning sun shone on a world of wind-cleared beauty. The sky was dazzling, and the air bore the crisp bite of the approaching winter.

The meadow was dotted with little piles of debris, scattered by the wind, but Moira could not see that there had been any real damage done.

With Tray at her side, she walked around the cabin, looking in the soft, turned earth of the flower beds for some sign of last night's visitor.

Near the side window, she found tracks, but she was unable to identify them. They were vaguely oval in shape, blurred by the wind-blown dust. There were only two of them, but then she supposed, if it had been an animal, the creature could have stood with his hind feet on the hard ground beyond the narrow border of soft earth.

The placement of the tracks made it look as if the creature had stood just outside the window, looking in.

Moira repressed a shudder, and tried to put the thought of the turning door knob out of her mind.

Tray sniffed at the footprints and whined nervously. She took him by the collar and let him into the house, where she removed a shoebox from the clothes closet, then took it outside and carefully placed it over the prints; pushing the edges of the box firmly into the soft earth.

After her morning tasks were finished, Moira found herself restless. She did not feel like doing any of the things that normally occupied her time. She recognized the restlessness as unusual, for up until now, she had been content to drift through the days, resting, dreaming, doing nothing.

It was, she told herself, the fault of the old woman, Miss Rhode, and her Goatman. That, and the wind. Well, since she couldn't get the matter out of her mind, perhaps she could find some information about Goatman. If Miss Rhode knew about him, surely other people did, too.

Dulcimer, the nearest town, had a population of 1,500 people. After picking up some needed supplies, Moira parked her car in front of the old, ivy-covered brick library, leaving Tray inside the car with the windows cracked.

Nelly Fairchild, the middle-aged librarian, was very friendly. Moira hesitated only slightly before asking her if the library had any information on a "Goatman."

"Goatman? Why, I haven't heard that name in years." Mrs. Fairchild smiled, and for an instant, Moira could see the pretty young woman who had been, underneath the rather plain middle-aged woman that she was.

"Why, my old Grandma used to scare me with stories about Goatman, when I was child. I used to have nightmares about him, all hairy and goat-smelling, with burning red eyes." She moved her shoulders in a brief, shuddery motion.

Moira was conscious of a keen disappointment. Was that all Goatman was, a bogeyman for children?

"A neighbor of mine mentioned him," she said, hesitantly. "She seemed to think that there might be some sort of danger . . ."

"Oh, that's right, you live out at the old Dearborne place." Mrs. Fairchild smiled. "Well, out there in the country, the people still believe in the old legends. They have stories that you wouldn't believe.

"Now, let's see. There was an article, just last fall, in one of the big papers.

Some writer came out here and talked to people . . ."

She turned away from Moira and walked to the back of the room, where she pulled out a large drawer from a tall, dark cabinet.

"Here it is." She unfolded a yellowing paper, and pointed to an article on one of the inside pages. Moira took the paper and held it to the light. Conscious of the smell of the dust, and of Mrs. Fairchild's watchful appraisal, she read:

"Baltimore, Maryland, Aug. 25, 1974: The people who live in the deep forest find

it easy to believe in things that city dwellers scoff at. Take the case of Goatman, a very real entity to the folk who live in Prince Georges County, Maryland, a secluded land where myths still live.

"Last week, Toller, a blue tick hound belonging to Bill Wheeler, was found horribly mutilated at the edge of the Wheeler property, which adjoins the forest. Old Toller is only one of the five dogs whose deaths are credited to the mysterious creature known as Goatman.

"What does Goatman look like? The accounts vary considerably. Some say he's about the size of a man, with legs like a goat, and the torso, head and arms of a man. Others say that sometimes he walks upright, and sometimes on all fours, and is entirely covered with long hair.

"Some say that Goatman is a man, or least he once was a man. A scientist at the nearby Agricultural Center, who has experimented on goats, believes that this man went mad, and ran away to live in a hut in the woods.

"At any rate, whatever Goatman looks like, if you have occasion to go walking in the woods around Prince Georges County, you had better walk softly, carry a big stick, and maybe a bag of garlic around your neck."

Moira rolled the images over in her mind. Of course the stories had to be apocryphal, but the concept was intriguing; and here, where the forest loomed and houses could be a mile or more apart, easy to accept. She had always felt that forests were magical, possessed of a life not visible to ordinary humans. Standing beneath a great tree, listening to the wind whisper in its branches, how could you not feel that the tree had a life, a spirit, a soul?

Forests and woods had always fueled imagination. Perhaps it was a human response to that which reminded them of their old connection with the earth and nature, a connection which modern life had worn so thin. But she was getting fanciful. Time to check out her books and get back to the car before Tray became too

impatient.

The setting sun was washing the meadow with color when Moira drove in the yard before the cabin. Everything--trees, grass, stones--was bathed in a heavy, amber light. The beauty of it made tears come to her eyes.

She unloaded the groceries, fed Tray, and fixed a hearty meal for herself. For some reason she felt unaccountably hungry.

After her meal, drowsy from the food and the warmth of the fire, she could not keep her mind on the book in her lap. Half-sleeping, her mind pondered the puzzle of Goatman. Was he simply a woodsy version of the bogeyman--as Mrs. Fairchild seemed to think -- a local variation of Bigfoot, frightening people on lonely farms, or something much, much older?

Her book dropped to the floor, temporarily rousing her, and early though it was, she crawled into her bed, beneath the cozy, brightly colored quilts, into the soft arms of the old feather mattress, and was soon deeply asleep, Tray lying in his usual place beside the bed.

Sometime during the night, she felt herself being drawn from the warm arms of sleep by a sound. Lip her consciousness came, borne on the thread of melody, a strange tune, but not unpleasant; and then sleep would claim her, and snatches of dreams, until the sound would call her up again. She felt herself rise and fall as if she was being home on a large, warm wave, until she was jolted into full wakefulness by Tray's echoing bark, and the sounds of his claws on the wooden floor.

She sat up abruptly, her hair falling over her eyes, to find her heart pounding. She could see the outline of Tray's body as he strained against the door, barking furiously.

Feeling out of focus and confused, Moira moved to Tray's side. In the moonlight, she could see him looking up at her, beseeching her to let him out to take care of this intruder on their nighttime quiet.

Moira put a hand on his bristling neck. "Shh, boy. Shh." Apprehensively, she crept to the window, and peered out onto the meadow, gilded by the light of the full moon, rising just above the trees. Was that a shadow, there, toward the front of the cabin? She shivered, her feet chilled by the cold boards of the floor. Should she let Tray out? Let him chase away whatever was out there, or should she keep him here, by her side?

Tray was growing frantic. She could feel his eagerness to be out there, his need to confront what he considered his enemy. Almost unwillingly, Moira reached for the bolt, and drew it back. The door was hardly open when Tray squeezed through, and burst into the yard.

As soon as he was out of the door, she regretted her decision. Barring the

door
behind him, she leaned against it, listening to the sound of his voice growling and barking, expecting to hear the sound dwindle as he and quarry fled for the trees at the edge of the meadow. But the sound did not dwindle, it stayed close to the cabin.

Ears straining, she could hear a scrabbling, a scuffling. Whatever it was, it was not running. It was standing its ground.

Filled with misgivings, she rushed to the one window, but it was facing the wrong way.

Still the terrible growling and scuffling; then Tray came into view, backing away from something, a dark shape that stood upright; no, it walked on all fours. She strained to see, but the shape seemed to change before her very eyes. Then the figure disappeared from view, and appeared to be moving away from the cabin, as Tray's barks and growls grew fainter. Finally, she could hear no sound at all, except for the faint whine of the wind, which had begun to rise, during the fight.

Suddenly, cold with a great fear, Moira rushed to the bed and burrowed beneath the quilts. For the rest of the night, she lay curled into a numb ball, trying to tell herself that Tray could take care of himself, and trying not to feel like a coward for not opening the door and looking for him.

The dawn broke as pink and tender as if it was just another morning, but Moira knew that it was not. Tray had not come back, whining at the door to be let in after frightening away the midnight prowler. Moira watched the light fill the window, then rose and hurriedly dressed.

Timidly, she opened the cabin door and stepped out, resenting what the night had done to her. Her peace was shattered, her armor of apathy breached.

The flower beds showed the marks of the battle; broken flowers lay scattered on the earth. She called for Tray, hesitantly, then louder, but received no answer other than a bird call from the woods. Shivering, she ventured farther, then farther, from the cabin.

It was down by the woodshed that she found him. His once intelligent eyes were dusty and glazed, and his glossy coat splattered with blood.

Tray was a large dog, and heavy. In her present state of mind, Moira knew that she could not bury him alone. After covering him with a tarp, she got into the car and drove, dry-eyed and almost unthinkingly, down to Four Corners, where she knew Mr. Thompson would be minding his one gas pump, cold drink machine, and a small collection of groceries. Miss. Rhode's place was closer, but there would be no one there but the old woman, and Moira needed the physical strength of a man.

When she pulled to a stop at the Corners, she could see that there were two other men there, besides Mr. Thompson. One of them she recognized as Old Man

Crowly, a crotchety old relic who lived up in the hills behind Thompson's place.

She did not recognize the other man.

Her legs felt unsteady, but she tried to appear calm and unemotional as she faced their studiously closed, but nonetheless expectant faces.

"I need some help," she said simply. "My dog has been killed. I need someone to help me bury him."

Moira thought that she could sense contempt behind their blank eyes. Probably their women could bury a dog or kill and skin a hog, if necessary.

She tried again. "I thought that since you gentlemen know about wild animals, maybe you could tell me what kind of animal killed him."

Their faces softened a little. In the end all three of them came with her; Thompson putting up a "closed" sign against his rickety gas pump, and following her in his rain of a pickup.

At the site of the death, they hunkered down around Tray, looking at him from every angle, examining the stuffed-up dust around the body. They examined the flower bed carefully, particularly the footprint Moira had protected. They chewed their wads of snuff, and talked quietly among themselves until Moira felt like an intruder.

Then they buried Tray in back of the house, and wiped their red hands on the legs of their jeans, and prepared to leave.

Moira realized that they were going to say nothing unless she directly confronted them. She planted herself in front of Thompson, and attempted to look him in the eye.

"What killed him, Mr. Thompson? What killed Tray?"

He kept his eyes studiously on the ground.

"Oh, could have been a bear, I guess. Maybe a wolf. There's a few of them left, they say."

The other men stood silently, scuffling their heavy boots in the dust.

Moira bit her lip, then almost pleadingly touched Thompson's arm. "Miss Rhode said something about a Goatman . . ."

Thompson at last looked up. "What'd she say?"

"She said something about his killing a dog, another dog, and she said I should be careful and keep Tray close to the house."

"Should of done," said Old Man Crowly, sharply. "Goatman has done for a lot of good dogs."

Thompson gave the old man an angry glance, but to Moira's relief, Crowly went

on. "She has a right to know, her a woman alone here. It's best that she knows."

"Miss Rhode didn't explain," she said humbly. "Won't you tell me what Goatman is? Please?"

"Oh, hell!" said Thompson. "Might as well. Goatman's a woodsy thing, Missy. There's been stories about him as long as I can recollect. Most of the time he lives back deep in the woods, but every once in a while he comes out, closer to where people live, and somebody sees him. I've heard said that he's the last of his kind, and comes out because he gets lonesome. Dogs hate him, and they attack him, and sometimes, I guess, he has to kill them to protect himself. Sometimes he kills other things, too, or at least so they say."

Old Man Crowly pulled off his hat and scratched his thinning white hair. "There's all kinds of stories. Some say that he does good things too. I've heard tell that sometimes he helps folks that git lost in the woods. And Mrs. Jenkins swears that he pulled out her milk cow that got stuck in the bog."

"What does he look like?" Moira's question came out so softly that she was surprised that Thompson heard her.

"Some say he looks like a hairy man, with goat's ears. Some say he's half man and half goat. But all say that he's terrible strong. Some say he's killed men and women, too, but myself, I think that's just scare talk."

Old Man Crowly spat in the dirt. "My old Grandma, she used to tell us that if'n someone, a woman, would go with Goatman, back to his hidey-hole in the woods, he wouldn't bother folks no more. Swore it was true; that once, when she was a girl, a young woman went out to him, went with him, and for twenty years nobody seen hide nor hair of either of them, When he started showin' up again folks figured that she had died. They tried to get another girl to go, but no one would do it. They was all afraid."

Moira felt the hair along her backbone stir, and clasped herself with her arms. She looked searchingly at each man, but not one weathered face expressed anything but sincerity and embarrassment. It was, she realized, not easy for these men to speak to her of these things.

"Then you think Goatman killed Tray?" she said.

Thompson shrugged. "Didn't say so, Missy. You just asked what we know about Goatman, and I told you. Well, boys, we'd best be on our way."

Moira gave each of the men a few dollars, and they got into the old pickup and moved off down the road. She watched them until they were out of sight.

That night, for the first time in months, the nightmares came back. In her dreams she saw Jason's face. Then Jason's face was replaced by a bizarre, hirsute countenance.

In the next moment, Moira snapped awake, suddenly and completely. The image of the dream was still in her mind, and her first reaction was wonder, as she realized that in her dream, she had been much more frightened by the face of her ex-husband than by the face of Goatman.

As she became conscious of the fact that Tray was not beside her, that she was completely alone, a cold trickle of fear seemed to slide beneath the warm quilt had lie against her belly.

She lay awake until dawn, but heard nothing unusual inside or outside the cabin.

As she got out of bed, still tired, she could not understand why she felt a sense of disappointment.

Victor paid his weekly visit the next day, and when he asked about Tray, Moira told him that Tray had wandered off, and had not come home. She didn't dare tell

him that the dog had been killed; she just didn't feel up to the pressure he would put on her to leave the cabin, and come back to the city.

Even so, he was upset. "I don't like the idea of you being here alone," he said,

and she could see his real concern for her in his eyes. "It was bad enough with

just the dog, but at least I felt that you had some protection."

She shrugged and raised her hands. "Against what, Victor? Just what do you think

is going to harm me out here?"

As she said the words, a guilty shiver tingled up her spine, and she wondered at

herself, at her action. Tray's death had made her feel that she really might be

in physical danger; and yet, she couldn't bear the thought of leaving this cabin, this place. She dismissed the thought and concentrated on using her charm

to sway Victor into being more accepting of her plans to stay.

"You can bring me another dog," she said, smiling at him, and touching his hand.

"A very large, fierce dog, if you wish."

She could tell that he still wasn't happy about her decision, but at least he did not seem disposed to argue further.

That night she prepared herself for bed very carefully, telling herself that it

was because she needed a good night's sleep, and bedtime rituals could be very important. In the glow of lantern light, she had a lovely bath before the fire.

Then she put on the long, old-fashioned lawn nightgown that felt so soft against

the skin. After that, she brushed her hair a hundred strokes, and then made a pot of chamomile tea, sweetened with honey, which she drank with the last of the

almond cookies which Victor had brought her from the city.

When at last she crawled into bed, she felt very drowsy and relaxed. Settling herself into the soft pillows, she felt safe and protected. As she sank into sleep she wondered that she felt none of the nervousness or fear that had plagued her the night before.

She knew she dreamed that night, because when she awoke the shadow of the dream was still there, a feeling of joy, of freedom, of arousal; she wanted to cling to it, but it slipped away as consciousness brushed it aside.

She found herself sitting up in her bed, the covers thrown aside, listening for the sound that had awakened her.

At first there was nothing but the wind, and the soft cry of a night bird, and then it came, growing softly, swelling swirling. She put her hand to her throat.

It was beautiful, like nothing she had ever heard.

Getting out of bed, she slid her feet into her slippers, her skin drawing back from the cold smoothness of the leather. From the foot of the bed she took her blue and purple shawl, gratefully drawing its soft warmth about her shoulders. It was odd how alive she felt, how aware of every physical thing, the touch of cloth, the cold woody scent of the air. And there was something else on the air, another scent, musky and stirring.

She took a deep breath, and moved toward the door, knowing now that she had come here for a reason, that she had not been running away from, but running toward, something.

Opening the door, she went out to meet it.

Behind her the wind swept leaves into the room, the lantern went down, and the fire went out. That was the way Victor found the cabin when he came to see her the next week.