

Pax Agricola

by Jay Lake

Joe Radford heard the bellow of a goat just outside his ancient Airstream trailer. Decades of experience told him what that particular call meant -- a proud goat, somewhere she shouldn't be. Joe jumped up from the kitchen table, scattering the spring seed packets he'd just gotten in the mail.

He ran outside to see Bella, the beautiful brown Nubian who was his oldest doe, in the garden nosing at the last of his winter vegetables. Joe's other two goats explored the driveway. It was time to change the latch on the goat pen again -- their tongues were like thumbs and patient as sin. He grabbed a spatula resting in the grass along with a stray trash can lid and banged them together. "Come on, girls!" he shouted. "Back in the pen."

The two in the driveway, Cloris and Rosaline, scuttled nervously toward their familiar barnyard. Bella gave him a baleful yellow-eyed glare and bent to the butternut squash. Joe shooed the other two goats all the way in and, with a sigh of despair for his squash, stopped to chain the gate shut.

He left the lid and spatula behind -- the racket wouldn't impress Bella; she was too smart for that -- and stalked into the garden. She'd knocked the wooden garden gate right off its hinges and torn the chicken wire away with it. "Come on, girl," Joe said, making little clucking noises. He smiled in spite of the damage to his vegetables. Bella was eating weeks' worth of his meals, but damn was she smart.

The goat suddenly staggered and collapsed against the half-buried gopher fence lining the squash row. A second later, Joe heard the flat crack of a rifle shot. Stumbling through his Vietnam-honed reflex of hitting the dirt, Joe ran to Bella. "God damned morons with hunting rifles," he muttered, as he slid to his knees to calm the goat who bleated softly. Logic told him there wouldn't be a second shot from a flustered hunter, but his back still had that target itch.

Bella had taken the bullet in the shoulder. Her flesh wasn't badly torn, but the real damage would be inside. Joe took her jaw in his hand, stared at the barred pupils of her golden eyes. She glared back at him, angry and ornery as ever, her musky goat smell mixed with the hot tang of blood. This goat wasn't going to die, not in the next few minutes anyway. She was too pissed for that. Joe took off his second-best work shirt, tore it in half and knotted the sleeve ends together to wind the rags around Bella's shoulder and across her chest as a simple pressure bandage.

Half naked and daubed with the goat's blood, Joe trotted toward the wooded fence line separating his property from Ralph Farney's just to the west -- a deer-and-quail hunting lease. By the time he got to the barbed wire, a big red SUV was slewing down Ralph's access road, too fast for Joe to get the plates.

Late February was out of season for deer anyway, so the idiot had to have been hunting on a quail license. Couldn't resist that big brown doe glimpsed through the trees, no doubt. By sundown, the son of a bitch who fired the shot would have his old frat brothers swearing he had been at the golf course with them all day. Joe knew from long experience that Ralph would be ignorant of any wrongdoing. Ralph made too much money off dumb-assed Austin lawyers to turn any of them in for a little violation like this. The income made Ralph stupid, which pissed Joe off. He firmly believed that a little strife was good for the soul -- damn it, he liked cranky neighbors; they left him alone -- but this was ridiculous.

Back in the garden Bella struggled to her feet. Helping her, Joe knew he should have the goat put down and slaughtered, which would provide food for almost a whole season, but Bella was too good a friend to treat that way. So he got the last of the month's cash out of the coffee can under the trailer's hitch,

evicted some chickens to load Bella into the back seat of his rusty white Gran Torino station wagon, and headed into Lockhart to see the large animal vet.

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Back from the vet, tired and flat broke, Joe knelt in the garden in the cool orange light of dusk and looked at the seeds he'd rescued from the kitchen floor. Each spring he got his order from some hippies out west. Near as he could tell from the little catalog, they were a bunch of tie-dyed fruitcakes living in old school buses, but they had the best damned tomato seeds going and some mighty fine cucumbers and squash as well.

Just like every year, the packets were handmade from recycled paper grocery bags and sealed with wax, the varieties stamped on them with fanciful lettering in spotty, colored ink. This time he'd got in Moreton and Carnival tomatoes, Gold Rush zucchini, Saladin cucumbers for his pickles, and just because he liked the name, Jack of Hearts watermelons. Rifling through the bucket he'd put the seed packets in, Joe found the usual scribbled invoice, this year with a note clipped to it:

Dear Mr. Radford. Because you are such a loyal customer, we have enclosed a special gift. Yours in Green Earth, South Cascade Seeds.

And those Oregon hippies had sent him a new variety, their gift from the Pacific Northwest. Joe almost smiled. The kraft paper packet just read "Pax Agricola" -- probably one of them Latin names the nurserymen used -- with two little girl fairies kissing over a flower Joe couldn't identify. Right below that, someone had written "Water with love."

Water with love. Right. Singing Grateful Dead tunes the whole time, probably. Love or no love, Joe doubted this whatever-it-was would even grow in Central Texas so far out of Oregon's cold and damp, but what the heck? He'd planted worse, and he could always turn the row over for a summer vegetable if the pax agricola didn't grow.

Joe needed to work dirt, to forget the idiots on Ralph's lease and his worries about Bella's wound getting infected. There weren't any directions on the packet, so Joe turned the soil in one of the rows he'd left fallow for the winter and mixed in bone meal and manure. With a gardener's natural economy he shook out half the seeds, inspecting their hulls. Finally, by the early moonlight he planted them one by one, each slipping beneath the earth as delicate as a kiss.

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The pax agricola sprouted almost overnight, fast as anything he'd ever seen, sending up the hopeful green swords of little shoots. Joe studied them, trying to determine if they were vines or bushes or what. From the little stamp on the packet, he had imagined a tall plant, like a Kansas sunflower, but of course there was no telling yet.

That day he mulched the shoots carefully against a possible late frost and double-checked his repairs to the goat-damaged chicken wire and the gopher fence.

* * *

Saturday night Ralph Farney's older boy Willie Ed, a varsity forward for the Lockhart Lions basketball team, brought several of his buddies and a couple of girls onto the deer lease. Joe watched the bonfire gleam through the woods for a while, until the shrieking started. He tried to call the sheriff on the party line, but Agnes Delore was badmouthing the other ladies in the Emmanuel Episcopal altar guild in great detail and pretended not to hear him asking her to get off the phone. So Joe walked to the fence and

climbed over.

"What are you kids doin'?" he shouted into the glare of the bonfire.

Willie Ed was lying down in a clinch with some girl Joe didn't recognize, one hand inside her sweater, the other down the waistband of her jeans. Another boy hung back. All three stared at Joe.

"Get out of here, old man," Willie Ed said in a rough voice that probably scared the freshmen back at Lockhart High.

Joe folded his arms. "Somebody screamed."

The girl glanced into the darkness on the other side of the fire, as the second boy grabbed a burning branch. "He said get out," the other boy shouted, waving the stick.

"Where is she?" Joe asked the girl, ignoring the boys.

"Willie Ed," she said, pushing her boyfriend off. "We should go." The girl started to wiggle away. "I'm getting Nancy."

"Stupid old turd," Willie Ed said to Joe with a snarl, then turned away.

A minute later, Joe watched two more boys and another girl walk out of the shadows beyond the fire. The six kids got into a minivan and drove off. The other girl -- Nancy? -- was crying, but there wasn't much he could do about that. At least he'd got them to stop messing with her. Maybe she'd learned something.

The next morning his gate was bashed in, and his mailbox was missing, the post a splintered stump.

"Farney's kid?" said the Caldwell County sheriff's deputy who answered the phone. "Hmm... Well, that's a problem now, isn't it?"

Joe knew where this was going, but he had to try. "That's what I thought," he said. "Kid's a problem."

The deputy sighed. "Think about it some more, Joe. The basketball team's going to the Division II playoffs. School really needs him. Lot of people will be angry if he's in trouble. Look, don't rock the boat. My advice is work it out quietly with Ralph."

Joe hung up on the deputy. Sometimes there was no point.

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A couple of weeks later, getting on into March, the pax agricola plants were pretty -- long, leggy stems, purple-edged leaves like little blades, and already a puffy crown like Queen Anne's lace got before it flowered and bolted to seed. They were only a couple of feet tall, but Joe figured they'd hit five or six feet full-grown.

He spent a quiet Tuesday afternoon raising the chicken wire higher above the pax agricola and weeding out the Johnson grass in his garden rows. The garden was more peaceful and satisfying this spring, somehow. Bella's stitches were healing up clean, so Joe had set aside the antibiotics for future use. The chickens clucked quietly in the yard around the trailer, and the turkey vultures circled high overhead in a blue silk sky. It was a perfect Texas spring day.

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Joe's wife called him that night.

"What the hell are you doing?" Beth Ann demanded, as soon as he picked up the phone.

"Hello, honey," Joe said. "Nice to hear your voice again."

"Don't you *honey* me, you white trash fool. I haven't seen a check in three months. Only reason you don't have a demand letter from Pettigrew already is he said I had to call you first."

Just like old times, Beth Ann riding his ass from the first flap of her gums. Also just like old times, she was full of it. As Joe understood the concept, "temporary support" was supposed to run out eventually, but he and Beth Ann had been in the process of getting divorced for almost six years. Pettigrew, her boyfriend-attorney, had a buddy in the family court in Travis County, and somehow things never turned out like Joe expected, what with the endless stream of continuances, stays and refilings. Stuffed behind the paneled walls of his trailer, all that paperwork made nice insulation.

Joe was pretty sure the system wasn't supposed to work this way, but he didn't know who to complain to, and he didn't have the money for his own lawyer. Besides, all the legal fuss kept Joe's wife away from him, which was the real point.

"Beth Ann," Joe said into the tense silence on the line, "You haven't had a check because Pettigrew attached my pension last fall. If I work to make enough money to pay you, I'll lose my Social Security, too. Then I'll have nothing."

"Joe," she said, her voice growing sharper, "a woman has needs. Just because you're lazy doesn't mean I should do without."

Last time he'd seen Beth Ann, she was driving Pettigrew's fancy German car. "I understand about needs, honey," he said, trying to be reasonable.

"Well, you *need* to send me some money, or I'll *need* to have you back in court. And Pettigrew says you won't like it this time."

Joe hadn't liked it the last few times, either. But the alternatives were worse. For one thing, if he didn't give her some money, she might come out here and visit him. "In the mail tomorrow," he said.

Beth Ann hung up on him. Joe sighed, then went out to his coffee can under the trailer hitch. He had just cashed this month's social security check. It was a hell of a price to pay, but at least he had his garden and his solitude.

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One Sunday morning a few weeks later, the *pax agricola* bloomed. They had matured much faster than Joe expected. It was only late March, and great purple-and-yellow flowers were bursting from the tall plants, each as high as his head.

The blossoms were narrow, like lilies, but more open, with variegated petals and the dusty smell of summer in their fragrance. As he sniffed them, Joe was reminded of the endless summers of his long-ago youth, chasing snakes in the tall grass, and nights between the cool sheets, savoring a chocolate bar snuck into bed.

He liked the smell so much that he fetched a pitcher of tea and his lone dinette chair and made a place in the garden where he could sit and watch the flowers. Each bloom was its own miracle, each plant its own world. This was why Joe lived in the country, put up with the inconveniences and indignities of his

life. The glory of nature, brought forth by his green thumb, sunlight and water.

There was plenty to be done around the place, but the plants were too nice. Joe didn't usually find himself being so lazy on a good working day, but somehow this felt right.

"Howdy, Mr. Radford," said a young man.

Looking up, Joe recognized the newcomer as the kid who'd threatened him with the burning branch. "Yeah?"

"It's, uh, me. Tony Alvarez. You remember?"

"I remember. Can I help you?" Joe was surprised at himself as soon as he said it -- normally he would have run the punk right off.

"Thought I'd fix up that busted gate a little more, then come sit with you a while here in the garden." The kid looked at his feet. Joe could swear Tony was blushing. "If you don't mind. Seeing as I owe you an apology and all."

"I guess so," said Joe. "I believe there's another chair in the hayloft of the goat barn." He really didn't care for visitors, but the kid seemed okay.

A little while later a red SUV came crunching down the gravel drive and parked next to Joe's old Ford. Three young men in suits and ties got out. Two of them walked over to the goat pen while the third brought Joe a big sack.

"Got some burritos on the way down here," the man explained with a grin. "Mind if we visit a while? We, uh, kind of want to make up for Decker over there being such an idiot." The stranger nodded toward the goat pen, where his two friends were feeding carrots to Bella, Cloris and Rosaline.

Joe's face felt prickly, hot, like he was embarrassed, but he wasn't. He rarely felt that way, and certainly not now. What was happening? He glanced at the flowering pax agricola. They nodded gently in the breeze.

Then Joe realized there wasn't a breeze blowing. "Suit yourself," he said, almost straining against his own words, "but I've about run out of chairs." Two was his limit, for all kinds of good reasons.

The man smiled. "We brought our own gear." Then, as he turned away, he added, "And, hey...thanks for letting everything be okay."

By noon, all the kids from the bonfire had shown up. The basketball players were fixing the windows on Joe's old trailer, caulking them tight, while the high school girls and the lawyers cleaned up inside. Ralph Farney and Agnes Delore came around with shovels and a wheelbarrow and cleaned out the goat barn, while two sheriff's deputies parked their cruiser in the driveway and in no time had the carburetor of the Gran Torino spread out on a towel, rebuilding it from a kit they'd bought in town. Even Gracie Thompson, the rural letter carrier that serviced Joe's R.F.D., turned up on her own time, hand-delivering a large check from social security making up for a long-term shortfall in their calculations of Joe's benefits. Gracie stayed to cook lunch for everyone on Joe's little smoker -- sausages and potatoes she'd brought with her.

There were too many people, acting too nice, trampling all over his land, and somehow it just didn't matter. Joe tried real hard to think about that, but every time he concentrated on his irritation, it slipped away from him. He had the overwhelming sensation that life was good, life was supposed to be good, and that he shouldn't worry about it.

That scared the hell out of him.

Fear cleared his thinking. It had to be the damned pax agricola flowers. Everything that normally went wrong around him was suddenly too right. *That* meant Beth Ann and Pettigrew would be here soon. He really didn't want to see his wife. Magic flowers or not, she was out of his life, and he liked it that way. No way was he reconciling under the influence of pax agricola. Not with her, not with Ralph Farney, not with no one.

He stood up, reached for one of the pax agricola flowers, to see if he could break it off the stem. It was like reaching into mud -- his hand moved slower and slower the closer it got to the flower. Joe got the feeling he could spend the rest of his life reaching for that flower and still never touch it.

Behind him, the double-toned blare of Pettigrew's car horn echoed through the woods along the driveway. Joe turned to see the red BMW pull to a stop behind the parked sheriff's cruiser. Following the BMW was a parade of vehicles, filled with people he vaguely recognized -- court clerks and Wal-Mart cashiers -- and plenty more he didn't. A helicopter clattered overhead, then banked over the second-growth woods to look for an open field in which to land.

"Holy shit," Joe whispered.

"All these people coming together and helping out...it's like the beginning of peace, Mr. Radford," said Tony Alvarez.

Joe didn't want peace, he wanted solitude, damn it. If he didn't do something quick, Beth Ann would be all over him trying to make up, and Joe would *never* be ready for that. If the problem was in the garden, well, there was a solution for gardens. "I'm getting my goat," said Joe. He shouldered Tony out of the way, marched to the goat pen, and whistled for Bella.

The old brown nanny wandered up, glaring at him as usual. The liquid gold eyes with their barred pupils could be unsettling to people who didn't know goats, but Joe and Bella understood one another. He undid the latch, put one hand on her collar and stroked her neck with the other. "I've got a special treat for you, girl," Joe whispered in her ear. "You'll love this. We're going to the *garden*."

All the years Joe had spent keeping the goats out of the garden had certainly taught Bella that word. She bleated, pulling him along to the chicken wire gate. Joe let the goat in, led her along the rows of sprouting zucchini, cucumber and watermelon, and stopped in front of the pax agricola. "I can't touch 'em," he whispered in Bella's ear, "but you're ornery enough to eat damned near anything, so do the right thing, old girl. Give me my life back."

Tony Alvarez gave Joe a puzzled look. "You're letting the goat into the garden?"

Bella sniffed the thick stalk of one of the pax agricola.

"Yep," said Joe, "and not a moment too soon."

In the distance he heard Beth Ann calling his name.

"Bella, just do it," Joe said. Fine time for the goat to develop some manners.

"Hey, that goat, she's--" Tony was interrupted by Joe putting a hand over his mouth.

"Never you mind, boy," said Joe. Bella munched the first stalk. The flower collapsed in a spray of purple-and-yellow pollen. "Things can be too easy, sometimes."

The goat set to the pax agricola with an appetite. She chewed down the stalks, ate the blooms, tore the leaves. As Bella finished off the plants, the hum of work around his little farm settled down to an uneasy calm.

"Well, Joe," said Beth Ann as she stepped into the garden.

"Hello, honey," said Joe. She was the same as ever -- peroxide hair, leopardskin spandex, a leather miniskirt. It didn't look as good on her as it had thirty-five years and forty pounds ago. Just the sight of her was irritating. Then voices began to rise again, this time in anger -- arguments breaking out, shouts, curses, all the ragged symphony of daily life.

Beth Ann's voice was just as nasty as the rest. "This is about normal for you. You can screw up anything."

Over her shoulder, Joe could see the deputies slugging it out with one of the Austin lawyers. Pettigrew stalked toward Joe with an angry look in his eye.

"I think it's the end of peace now, Mr. Radford," said Tony.

As the goat started in on the zucchini seedlings, Joe smiled. "Back to normal. Ain't it great?"

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After the County Attorney decided there wasn't any point in prosecution for incitement to riot and disturbing the peace, Joe got out of jail and came home to find that Agnes Delore and Tony Alvarez had been feeding his goats and keeping an eye on the garden. Tony told him the goats had behaved. The Gran Torino really did run better, and the trailer was less drafty, so the whole sorry business hadn't been a total loss.

Joe sat at the little table, examining the kraft paper pax agricola packet. He tipped a few of the remaining seeds into his hand. *Tiny things, to do so much*, he thought, rolling them back and forth with his fingertip. He wondered for a moment how they'd taste. "You never know," Joe said aloud, then dropped the seeds back into the packet and reached for the tape to seal it up. Maybe next year he'd be ready for more peace and less quiet.

Outside, a goat bellowed. It didn't sound like one of his. *Uh-oh*, thought Joe. He peeked out the trailer's tiny window toward the goat barn and the pen surrounding it. Bella leaned against the gatepost, scratching herself and glaring at him as she chewed her cud. Then Joe saw a whole parade of goats picking their way on to his property, heading for the pen.

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About the Author:

Jay Lake is a member of the Science Fiction Writers of America with some 35 short story appearances in 2003 and a similar number forthcoming in 2004 in such markets as *Asimov's*, *Leviathan 4*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. He is also a co-fiction editor of the *Polyphony* anthology series and the upcoming *All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories*.