

Cuzco, The Goat of Many Colors

It's been just over a year since we said goodbye to our friend Cuzco, and words come easier as time casts its mellow glow over the memories. "Cuzco the One-Horned Wonder Goat" was a central part of my life for fifteen years, but he had lived life fully and he had lived it well and he was ready to make his final bow. Sitting with him in his last hour, I thought back to the day Phil and I found the tiny, colorful goat with the huge parachute ears at a lovely little farm in western New York state during our college years.



It was 2002 and Phil and I had just celebrated our third anniversary. College break had started and my mare was due to foal any time. We needed a companion for the coming colt and a young goat seemed the ideal choice. Phil had fallen in love with goats at a county fair two years before when he watched one devour the ribbon it had won at the show. Phil turned to me and said, "You know, I'm not much of a farm animal person, but goats are funny! I could get into goats!" I was into horses myself, but once a new foal came into the picture, our quest for a suitable goat companion began.

It wasn't easy. Goats, we discovered, could be expensive and our budget was extremely limited. We visited a few farms and looked at a few goats, but all of them (except Mr. "Free to Good Home") were outside our budget and none of them were very pretty. I was ready to give up the idea, but as we drove through the rolling green farm country southeast of Buffalo, NY a kaleidoscopic splash of vibrant color caught my eye.

"PHIL DID YOU SEE THAT GOAT?!?!!" I screamed.

Phil, who had been napping peacefully in the passenger seat, almost leaped from his skin with alarm at my outburst, and he snatched wildly for the dashboard as the car careened to the side of the road and screeched to a halt. I nearly got us into a wreck as I cut across traffic in an illegal U-turn back to the farm. I had to see if that goat was real! We pulled into the driveway and I ran to the pasture fence.



"LOOK! Look at that goat!" I was squealing and almost jumping up and down in my excitement. He was like a brightly colored patchwork quilt, with wild splashes of white on his brown and black coat. His speckled gray ears flew out to either side like sails, and his white-tipped tail curled proudly over his back as he skipped playfully over the grass beside his mother and sister. He couldn't possibly be for sale, and he was far too pretty to be in our price range--but I had to ask.

I banged around the farm, shouting into a dozen or so empty barns and sheds. It was a nice day and all the animals were out to pasture. Maybe the farmer was working in the fields. I was about to give up when I found a man tending to a cow way in the back of the very last cavernous barn. The price for a baby goat? Twenty-five dollars.

Twenty-five dollars! My heart leaped. We could afford that price! But I would have to call back. The goats belonged to the man's wife and she was out for the afternoon. I took down the phone number and I called back that night. A week later the little polychrome goat was ours for \$25. He had never been handled and was wild as a hare, so I felt bad for him as he trembled in wide-eyed terror in the back seat of our Buick, but I felt confident we would become friends. I didn't know the first thing about goats, but I could tell that he was a bold and self-assured little character despite his

current distress. He withdrew from our hands when we tried to touch him, but he cocked his tiny horns in a defensive posture and raised his little hackles in warning. He had attitude and he wasn't afraid to stand up for himself. Before the end of our trip home, Phil and I had settled on the name "Cuzco" after the cocky, self-important llama in Disney's recent movie, *The Emperor's New Groove*. Yes, we were aware that our new goat was not a llama, nor even remotely related to one, but his lofty attitude was already beginning to show on the ride home.



It took time to bond with our new baby. Cuzco was only about eight weeks old and had never been handled until the day he was taken from his mother and sister, vaccinated, and banded--not a good introduction to people! The poor little thing bolted at the sight of me, but luckily he took an immediate shine to my mare, Easter. Easter, heavily pregnant and grouchy with her foal due any day, was in no mood to entertain the newcomer and tried to stomp him to death a few times during the first day or two, but her aggression did not dampen Cuzco's enthusiasm. He would skip just out of reach of her hooves and then bounce happily back to her side.

For the first several days, I kept a twelve-foot catch rope tied around Cuzco's neck and locked him in a spare horse stall at night because there was no other way for me to get near him. The rope worried me, but the thought of him being uncatchable worried me more. Several times a day, I caught him, reeled him in slowly, and then picked him up and held him on my lap for half-hour stretches, singing and talking to him. On the third day I shortened the catch rope to 18 inches, and within a week or two I was able to remove it completely. Our skittish goat had become my funny little shadow.

Easter's foal came almost three weeks late, and the wait began to be nerve-racking for me. Easter and Cuzco were boarded at a professor's barn over a mile from my apartment, and I began to wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, wondering if she were foaling and needed help. I'd hurry into my robe and barn boots, grab a flashlight, and drive up to the barn at all hours, only to find her munching happily away in the pasture. It was getting ridiculous, so I finally slung a hammock in the spare stall and spent my nights there with Cuzco. It was during this time that I discovered the unparalleled joy of falling asleep to the soothing, rhythmical sound of a goat quietly chewing his cud. It is a calm, contented whisper that sent me into some of the deepest sleep of my life.



The foal came and I named him "Jet." He and Cuzco grew into good buddies over the protests of Jet's mother, who didn't approve of her precious son mixing with the riffraff. It was a summer filled with high adventure as Jet and Cuzco both learned how to walk on leads,



hike in the woods, cross creeks, and navigate the quiet college town streets with their humans. That fall the students returned and Cuzco immediately endeared himself to the scholars. His jaunty good looks and friendly manner cut quite a dash in that little college town and his popularity inspired Phil to run him for Homecoming King. Cuzco and Phil canvassed the campus.

They distributed flyers, hung posters, took out an ad in the college paper, shook hands, and held press conferences. "Cuzco for King!" was the rallying cry, and the competition didn't stand a chance. Cuzco

won a landslide election not only for Homecoming King, but for Homecoming Queen as well.



Unfortunately the "powers that be" did not approve of having a goat for their royal court and all of Cuzco's votes were tossed out. But Cuzco still enjoyed a prominent place in the Homecoming parade and the acting King swore him fealty throughout the weekend, much to the Homecoming committee's chagrin.

Cuzco and the horses moved with us to Lake City, Colorado in 2003. He became something of a celebrity as the only goat in all of Hinsdale County. He grew bigger than we ever imagined a goat could be, topping out at 38" at the withers and a little over 200 lbs. As Cuzco grew, I began to realize that he would soon be large enough to pull a cart or pack gear on hikes. As this revelation dawned on me, I discovered that others were using large goats for similar purposes. We bought a cart and harness and trained Cuzco to pull. I bought a used llama pack so Cuzco could carry our gear on day hikes around Lake City.

Cuzco also became my constant riding companion. Wherever me and my horse went, Cuzco followed. However fast or far or high into the mountains we rode, Cuzco kept up the pace and rarely flagged. He was strong, fit, and athletic, even keeping up when I galloped after a herd of elk on the Continental Divide.

In 2005, something happened that changed Cuzco's life forever. I was riding with some friends, and for once in his life, Cuzco stayed behind with a lone horse that was being brushed in the corral. The lady brushing the horse wasn't watching her dog. I was on a ridge overlooking the ranch when I saw a Cuzco streak across the pasture with the dog in hot pursuit. It wasn't the first time that dog had chased Cuzco, but usually Cuzco would run to one of his horse buddies for protection. This time the horses were gone and he was in

a panic. I watched as they disappeared over a fence on the far side. The dog came back. Cuzco didn't. I wasn't too concerned at first. I thought Cuzco had run down the draw and was afraid to come back. There was a highway at the bottom of the cliff and he was probably wandering along it, so I rode down to look for him.

I was not prepared for the pitiful sight that met me. Cuzco had not run down the draw. He had leaped in blind panic over a thirty-foot cliff and had landed in a rocky ditch next to the highway. Some people on a motorcycle saw him lying next to the road, and stopped to see if he was still alive. They rolled him over a couple of times and he slowly came to, but the ranch entrance was hidden from view around a corner so the couple didn't know where the goat had come from or how to get him back until I rode up on my horse.

Cuzco was in bad shape. His left horn was cracked in the middle and broken along the base. It was pushed all the way back onto his neck. Blood streamed from his nose and mouth and he had a huge gash in his neck. He was sore all over and was having trouble walking.



His pupils were dilated and I could tell he was concussed. He knew enough to follow my horse, however, and was able to limp his way up the mile-long driveway to the ranch. He collapsed in exhaustion when we reached the corrals. We drove him to a vet who amputated his left horn. It was too mangled to save. The skull was broken and there was a hole into the sinus cavity. Cuzco stayed in hospital for three days before I could take him home.

But goats are very resilient. When Cuzco was released from the vet, I put him in a small corral with one gentle horse as a companion. His poor head was all wrapped in bloody bandages and I was sure he would take many weeks to recover. Wrong! He took about three days. When I came to check on him the second day, he was very unhappy to be in the corral and wanted me to let him out. I did not relent so

Cuzco took matters into his own hooves! He discovered that with one horn missing, he could turn his head sideways and squeeze through the corral bars to escape. The width of his horns used to prevent such possibilities!

On the third morning I found the companion horse lonely and whinnying in the corral while Cuzco was enjoying himself in the pasture with the herd. I forgot about trying to keep him contained after that, and he healed faster than I thought possible. In no time at all, the hole in Cuzco's head closed over and the huge area of exposed tissue where his horn had been was covered in fine, new hair. He soon became known as the "One-Horned Wonder Goat", and from that time on he became an extraordinary escape artist. If he could slip his head sideways through any hole, his body soon followed.

The loss of the horn was devastating at the time, but in hindsight it became Cuzco's most distinguishing feature. It set him apart, made him unique, and was the central focus of most conversations about him. Wherever Cuzco went, people remembered him. Few could recall his name or say it correctly, but everyone remembered "the one-horned goat". His impressive size, his flashy coloring, and his aristocratic presence attracted people to Cuzco, but the single horn ensured they never forgot him.



Cuzco had many travels and adventures in his fifteen years and was able to meet people all over the country. When we visited Utah, we met tourists from around the world! Cuzco was an excellent representative for packgoats—strong, handsome, athletic, and well-bonded. He also had a tendency to show off and pose any time he saw a camera. Once I was walking down a street and realized that Cuzco was no longer behind me. I turned to look and he was standing

in the middle of the road, blocking traffic as he struck a regal pose, because someone on the sidewalk had stopped to take pictures of him. He refused to budge until the tourist put her camera away. I'm not sure how he knew, but I'm convinced that Cuzco was perfectly aware of what cameras were for because he nearly always stopped and struck a pose when saw one.

Cuzco had impeccable manners when out in public but at home he was known far and wide as our personal guard goat. He menaced visitors, chased children, and did his best to intimidate anyone who dared set foot on "his" front porch! He grew increasingly cranky in his old age and he never forgave Phil and I for buying a couple of doelings in 2012. Cuzco had spent ten years as an "only goat" and he was outraged when I brought other caprines into his life. But we learned how to manage Cuzco's curmudgeonly ways and he continued traveling and hiking with us until he retired in 2016.

In 2015 Cuzco attended the North American Packgoat Association Rendezvous in Island Park, ID. He was 13 years old by then and arthritis was fast catching up to him. But he was still game for an adventure, and when he saw me getting the trailer ready the day before our trip, he hopped in and refused to leave. Cuzco packed 35 lbs. on our work project hike and ended up having to tow a balky yearling goat behind him for much of the trail as well. Despite having spent the previous two days in the trailer, he did not tire on that hot, steep hike. The highlight of the Rendezvous was when John Mionczynski, "Father of Goat Packing," fixed his long gaze on Cuzco and quietly stated, "*That* is a very fine animal."



We put Cuzco to rest on April 19, 2017. He was almost exactly fifteen years old. He'd led a full, happy life and he was ready to

depart. Cuzco "put his affairs in order" when he passed his leadership baton to Finn, the next goat in command. Finn did not have to battle Cuzco for top position--Cuzco handed him the throne and then



abruptly stopped eating his regular meals. He was happy to chow down on junk food of all kinds--donuts, popcorn, cookies, chips, candy, cheesy garlic bread knots from the local pizzeria--these he devoured in toothless zeal, but I could not persuade him to eat anything healthy. He was too old to care about health any more and only wanted to be happy, so we indulged him. During his last week we held a special campfire in Cuzco's honor where I allowed him to raid the hotdog buns, eat a whole Hershey's chocolate bar, and devour a package of graham crackers. I even made him his own personal s'more. He'd

never been allowed to eat a s'more, although he'd often begged for one. He loved it and spent the rest of the evening trying only somewhat successfully to lick a big glob of melted marshmallow off his chin.

On his last day, Phil and I gave Cuzco a final grooming. We put the other goats away so Phil and I could take him for a short walk with us all to himself as he'd always preferred. He couldn't go far. He was so tired. He had a wonderful last day. He ate four powdered donuts and a bowl of buttery cheese popcorn. He ate many peanuts and animal crackers on our walk, and he finished up with almost an entire can of cheddar Pringles. He was a happy goat right up to the end. It was truly a sign when we came back from our walk that Cuzco stopped at his own graveside and waited there while Phil and I went on across the pasture and up to the house to retrieve a few things for his burial. I'm sure he knew, but he was ready and, true to form, he wasn't afraid. Cuzco cheated death many times in his fifteen years

and had nothing left to prove. He reminded me of “The Tale of Three Brothers” in the book *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*--“And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life.”

The vet came out to administer the final rites. I had Cuzco lie down on a blanket with his head in my lap. He leaned his face against mine, and when the vet gave him the injection he closed his eyes and went peacefully to sleep just like in the movies. I felt his last breath



hit my cheek and he was gone. Cuzco is laid to rest under our totem pole. His baby portrait is carved at the top. When we look out the window or come up our driveway we'll see his marker and be reminded of all the wonderful, happy times we had together. I'll never forget my “Cuzco the One-Horned Wonder Goat”. He'll always be larger than life, like the goat version of John Wayne. It was very hard to let him go, but it was the right thing to do. He was ready, and as he gently passed from this life I could almost hear him whisper “Thank you.”