

Of Goats and Garbage

I've had quads. Not me personally I hasten to add but the goat Canasta. Quite a shock for all concerned. Although still somewhat of an amateur in goat management, I thought her near to bursting proportions during pregnancy indicated twins – just shows how ignorant one can be. This means however, the goat population has risen way beyond my conservative estimation – six goats will be quite a handful. Kids are attractive from the moment they're born. Unlike kittens and puppies with lie inert and defenceless with their eyes shut for a couple of weeks, they are up on their feet and jumping around within an hour. A couple of weeks later they are turning somersaults and chewing up whatever....well whatever they're not supposed to be chewing up. The sexes are divided equally – two creamy white females and two black males with white markings, the splitting image of their wicked elder brother, Blackjack. Dogs meanwhile have been glued to the fence licking their lips quite unashamedly for days on end. From their viewpoint of course, baby kid would make for a delectable suppler supplement. Difficult to dissuade them from thinking otherwise.

Stories abound about goats living on plastic, barbed wire, in fact any rubbish lying around. This gives goats an unfair reputation. They are in fact picky eaters, they like variety. If you put goats out in an orchard full of lush pasture favoured by cattle and horses, they will ignore it for the most part and head straight for the trees. Any reachable branches will be stripped bare and then they'll start on the bark. Hedgerows and banks with a variety of wild plants are favoured too. Whereas cattle and horses are grazers, goats are browsers. Curiosity compels them to try apparently

inedible and certainly an unappetising assortment of things. Blackjack tested on various nails, lengths of vinyl string and several cardboard boxes which the carpenters had carelessly discarded, before I caught him at it, with no ill effects. Must have a gut of iron.

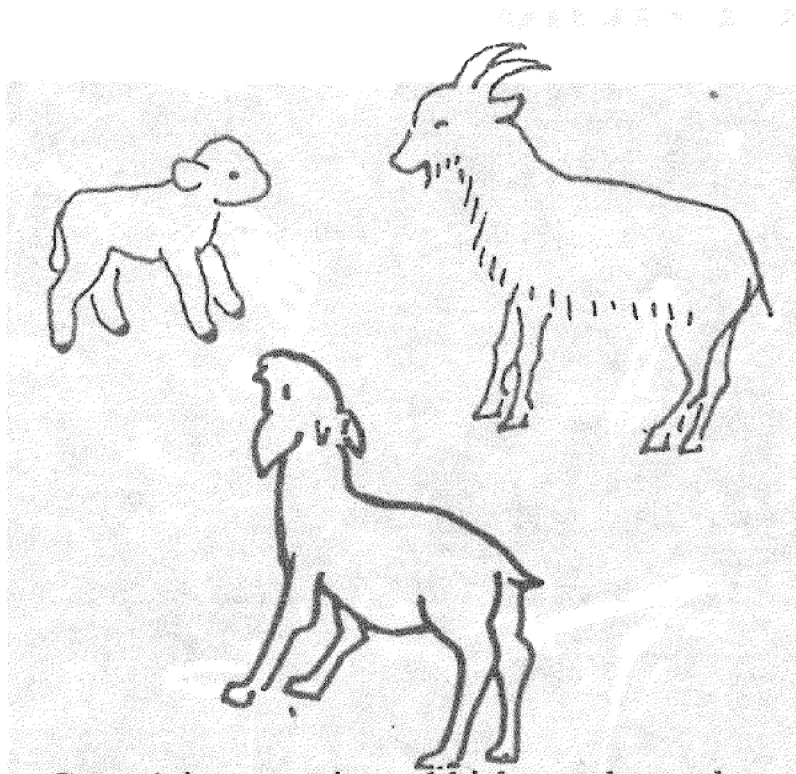
Goats' interest in rubbish tends to be limited to its edible properties. Mine to its infinite uses. One of the head breaking things about the recent move was having to jettison 15 years of carefully accumulated junk. It's steadily building up again much to the dismay of friends who thought (hoped) I'd reformed. The problem is there are so many temptations in a throw-away paradise like Japan. Even foreigners who would consider it beneath their dignity to scavenge in their own countries, sneak out after dark to treasure hunt on the eve of a bulk rubbish (*sodai gomi*) day. Some boast they've never had to buy a stick of furniture in Japan, their place is fully furnished with these unwanted handouts. Nose has no bulk rubbish collection – until this April it had no rubbish collection whatsoever. Now at least they collect either cans or bottles on alternate months as well as the burnable stuff. Locals therefore tip what the town won't collect on the mountain. Eyesores though they are, these tips are veritable treasure troves for scavengers like myself. Sometimes whole houses find their way up there; a wide range of tansu, china-ware, windows, doors and bric-a-brac. End bits from new houses provide lengths of roofing, wood, in fact the beginnings of another house if one collects over a year or two.

On forays to the rubbish tips I sometimes bump into specialist rubbish collectors. One is Itami-san. Since he's mainly hunting for metal junk our interests seldom clash. His home base contains two collection yards, both mountains of junk. But whereas you might assume he'd forget what he has in that labyrinth of metal, he can pinpoint extremely accurately any particular piece one wants, be it a defused bomb-shell, a size 14 spanner or even on one occasion, an anvil. He also deals in fringe junk like blankets from police cells complete with emblems or used clothes. A lifetime of viewing the backdoor of peoples' lives has

convinced him that the majority of Japanese are imbeciles, killing themselves by over-working just so that they can buy more consumer goods which they then barely use before throwing away. Itami-san lives frugally yet comfortably in a much repaired shack surrounded by his best pickings (mainly clocks). Carefully balanced meals (he does all his own cooking), washed down with half a bottle of sake a day, keeps him healthy despite his 77 years. In fact whenever he goes to collect his pension at the town hall, they unkindly comment “Not you again. Still alive?”

Scrap or junk collecting jobs like his are considered rock bottom by Japan’s white-collar orientated society. But things are changing. Junk collecting is now becoming fashionable under a new title – recycling. The recycling scale ranges from the valuables like antiques at the top, down to groups of housewives whittling away an afternoon making crinoline ladies out of empty whiskey bottles. This seems a fairly pointless exercise since whoever is the recipient of one of these is likely to chuck it into the nearest trash bin but nevertheless people are trying. It’s hard to drum up support for recycling when people are surrounded by seeming abundance. When you calculate how much packaging material you have to throw away after a trip to the supermarket, one wonders if the message is getting through in Japan.

I’d like to put together an article on innovative ways to use waste so if anybody has any bright recycling ideas perhaps they’d drop me a line % KTO.



Elizabeth Oliver