

A HORSE AND TWO GOATS

“A Horse and Two Goats” is a short story written by acclaimed Indian writer R.K. Narayan. The story was first published in 1960 in the Indian newspaper *The Hindu*. It did not reach a broad international audience until it was published again in 1970 as the title story in Narayan’s short story collection *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories*. The story appeared for a third time in *Under the Banyan Tree*, another volume of Narayan’s short stories published in 1985. Although the story was generally praised by critics, it is not one of Narayan’s more well-known works.

The story takes place in Kritam, one of the smallest of India’s seven hundred thousand villages. Despite its small size, the village has a grandiose name: Kritam means “crown” or “coronet” in the Indian language of Tamil. There are only thirty houses in the village, most of them simple thatched huts. The only sophisticated residence in the village is the Big House, a brick and cement building from whose well the local villagers get their water. Muni, an old goat herder, lives with his wife in one of the huts. He is the poorest resident of the village. Every day, he herds his flock of forty goats and sheep to the highway on the outskirts of the village and lets them graze as he sits and watches them.

One day, Muni picks some “drumsticks,” or seed pods, from the tree in front of his home and asks his wife to cook them in a sauce for him to eat. Because of the couple’s poverty, Muni’s daily meals usually consist of only millet and an onion at lunch. Muni’s wife agrees to make the sauce if he can get all of the necessary ingredients from the village shop: dhal, chili, curry leaves, mustard, coriander, gingelly oil, and a potato. Muni has no money to pay for the items, but tries to convince the shop owner to give them to him on credit by engaging in conversation and laughing at his jokes. However, the shop owner shows Muni a ledger of past debts that he owes, and says he must pay them off before he can apply for credit. Muni tells him that his daughter will give him some money for his fiftieth birthday, although he does not actually have a daughter. The shop owner does not believe him and says that he looks at least seventy.

Muni goes home and tells his wife to sell the drumsticks, since he could not get the ingredients for the sauce. He then takes his flock of goats and goes to the highway to let them graze as usual. While he is there, he sits on a pedestal at the base of a clay statue depicting a majestic horse and warrior. The statue had been there since Muni was a young child, and his grandfather had explained to him that the horse in the statue was a reference to the mythical horse Kalki, who according to Tamil legend will come to life when the world ends and trample all bad

men. While Muni is sitting there, he sees a yellow station wagon coming towards him down the highway.

The car runs out of gas and comes to a stop on the road in front of the statue. A white foreigner gets out of the car and asks Muni in English whether there is a gas station nearby. However, Muni cannot communicate with him because he does not speak English and the foreigner does not speak Tamil. The foreigner, who tells Muni he is a coffee trader from New York, takes an interest in the statue and wants to buy it. He offers to pay Muni for the statue, thinking that it belongs to him. Muni does not understand what the foreigner wants, and initially mistakes him for a police officer, because he is dressed in khaki. Muni believes the man had arrived to investigate a dead body that was found on the border between Kritam and a neighboring village a few weeks before. He tells him that he does not know anything about the incident and that the murderer probably lives in the other village.

The foreigner does not understand. He offers Muni some cigarettes, and explains that he and his wife, Ruth, decided to travel to India on vacation after a power failure in the Empire State Building forced him to work four hours without air conditioning on a hot summer day. Muni eventually realizes that the foreigner is interested in the statue, and starts explaining the statue's history and the legend of Kalki to him. He talks about the Hindi

religion and asks the foreigner about his family while the latter tries to negotiate a price for the statue and says that it would look good in his living room. The conversation continues for a while before the foreigner gives Muni a hundred-rupee note and asks him to help move the statue to his car. Muni believes at first that the foreigner is asking him for change, and suggests that he go to the village money-lender. When the foreigner stoops down to pet some of his goats, however, Muni mistakenly believes that the man is giving him a hundred rupees to buy his flock. Elated, Muni accepts the man's money and leaves the goats behind for him.

Thinking Muni had agreed to sell him the statue, the foreigner flags down a passing truck and pays the men to help him detach the statue from the pedestal and move it to his car. He also pays to siphon off some of their gas so he can restart his engine. Muni goes home and shows his wife the hundred-rupee note, telling her that he received it from a foreign man who stopped to buy his goats. At that moment, however, the couple hears bleating outside their door and discover two of Muni's goats standing there. Muni is confused, while his wife suspects him of stealing the money, and says she will go to her parents' home because she does not want to be there when the police apprehend him.

The main themes of the story are culture clash, miscommunication, money, wealth, and poverty. Narayan contrasts Muni's impoverished but culturally rich lifestyle with the foreigner's materialistic worldview, in which everything may be bought and paid for. While the horse statue carries great cultural and religious importance for Muni's village, to the foreigner it is just a decorative item to serve as a talking piece during house parties.