

Rocktalkers

Once upon a time, in a country far away, the land was owned by trolls who lived in caves. Sheep wandered freely on the land because the trolls didn't know how to build fences, and wouldn't have left their caves to build them if they knew how. People roamed freely too. The trolls let the people on their land because the people gathered sheep dung and sold it to the trolls. Nobody quite knows why the trolls wanted the stuff, but they did and they paid a fair price for it. This went on for many, many years.

Gathering sheep dung is no fun. You have to wander over the meadows looking for it, and when you find some you have to bend over and scoop it into a dung bag. The bag grows heavy as the day wears on, your back aches from bending over, and your nose isn't exactly pleased with the day's haul either.

There were rocks in the meadows where the sheep grazed. One day a man grew tired of gathering sheep dung. He set down his bag, climbed on top of a rock, and vented his frustration to the world. It made him feel better to talk about his troubles, even if no one was listening, so he began to do it every day.

One day while he was standing on his rock and talking, a sheep wandered up and listened to what he had to say. When he had finished talking, the sheep pooped and walked away. The man was happy about this donation, and the sheep felt a sense of relief, too.

The sheep told his friends about the rocktalker, and pretty soon the man attracted a flock of pooping sheep every time he climbed on his rock and talked. It was much easier to gather dung from a flock of sheep than to wander over the meadow looking for individual deposits, so the man was happy.

It didn't take long for other people to notice what the man was doing, and pretty soon they began climbing on rocks and voicing their opinions to the world. All across the meadow there were men and women standing on rocks, talking to pooping sheep. Sometimes, if a sheep didn't like what they heard, they would express their displeasure by farting. This made everyone unhappy, except for the sheep who let it fly, and it drove some of the sheep away. More often, though, if a sheep didn't like what one rocktalker said they'd simply leave and find a rocktalker they agreed with. The net result was that all the rocktalkers thought the vast majority of sheep agreed with them, regardless of what they said, because the sheep that stayed to listen left poop, not farts.

It didn't take long for the news media to get wind of this, and soon reporters were flocking to the meadow to report on what the rocktalkers said. This was much easier than uncovering and reporting real news stories. They also described how much poop each rocktalker received,

as an indication of how popular the rocktalker's opinions were. This was easier than doing research to see if there was any truth to the rocktalker's claims. The publicity led to competition among the rocktalkers, all of whom wanted to be in the news. The sheep were easily bored by calm discourse, so the rocktalkers began shouting extreme opinions to attract more sheep. (And more poop.)

The troll who owned the meadow where the rocktalkers congregated was very happy. The rocktalkers attracted sheep from all over, and soon he had more dung than he knew what to do with. (Again, nobody knows what he actually did with it, but whatever it was, it made him happy.) He was the richest troll in the country.

The man who had been the first rocktalker was famous among the sheep. Whenever he spoke, a huge flock gathered around him. It didn't take him long to gather enough dung to live a comfortable life, so he had much free time to wander the land. During his travels he noticed that since all the sheep had flocked to the meadow with the rocktalkers, the grass in other parts of the land was uneaten, taller, and greener. The next time he climbed on his rock and spoke he told the sheep that there were greener pastures on the far side of the hill. They just needed the courage to leave the security of their overgrazed meadow to look for it.

This made the troll who owned that meadow very angry. He was afraid all the sheep would leave his meadow and poop on some other troll's property. He couldn't control the sheep, and he wasn't certain he could control what the man said, but he did own the rock on which the man spoke. The troll told the man he could no longer use that rock. In fact, he was prohibited from speaking on any rock the troll owned. He also warned the other rocktalkers not to repeat anything the man had said, and he insisted they tell their sheep that the man had been lying. He told them that even if the man had been telling the truth, which the troll seriously doubted, they had a duty to protect sheep from dangerous ideas like seeking greener pastures. If the other rocktalkers didn't follow his rules he would take away their rocks.

The man who had started it all sadly left the meadow, walked over the hill, and into the broad sunlit uplands of another troll's property. There were rocks in this meadow too, but no sheep. He climbed onto a rock and bewailed his troubles, but there were no sheep to listen.

There was some dung left in this meadow from the years when sheep had grazed there, but it was old, dried, and scattered. The man had to work very hard to find it, and the troll who owned the land would only pay him a pittance for it. Life was hard. Every day he climbed a rock to talk about his troubles, but his was a voice in the wilderness, heard by no sheep.

One day a sheep who had been intrigued by what the man said in the old meadow finally gathered the courage to walk over the hill. He was delighted to discover that what the man had said was true. The grass *was* greener, and it was delicious! When the man spoke on the rock

that afternoon the sheep showed his gratitude by leaving a generous donation. The sheep also crossed back into the old meadow to tell his friends that what the man had said was true. Soon many sheep flocked to the greener pasture, and generously rewarded the man who spoke the truth.

It didn't take long for the other rocktalkers to notice they were losing sheep to the new meadow. They followed the man's lead, not by moving to his meadow but by spreading throughout the country, each becoming a celebrity in his or her own meadow. The sheep followed, and by spreading out there was enough lush green grass for all of them. The sheep were very happy. The trolls who owned these meadows were happy too, because now they all had more dung than they knew what to do with. The rocktalkers were happy because no troll could ever again tell them what they could, or could not, say because they could always move to a different meadow. Now everyone was happy. Except for the troll who used to have a monopoly on rocktalkers. He was unhappy, but nobody cared about him anyway.