

Mac

Margaret Klein Wilson

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*We are grateful to Margaret Wilson for sharing her article about Mac, her guard llama, with our readership. Margaret wears many hats. She is a shepherdess in Dummerston, Vermont (near Putney), although not yet converted to Soay. A dyer, designer, and all-around expert in matters fleece, she owns and operates the “Mostly Merino” fiber studio, where she specializes in hand-tied luxury yarns, knitting kits, and custom-knit sweaters. And as if that were not enough, Margaret is a prolific writer. She is the author and editor of *The Green Mountain Spinnery Knitting Book*. Her articles have appeared in *Interweave Knits*, *Handwoven*, and *Knit Lit: Sweaters and Their Stories*. “Mac” previously appeared in *Knit Lit the Third: We Spin More Yarns*, edited by Linda Roghaar and Molly Wolf, published by Three Rivers Press in New York, and readily available in libraries and on the internet – a delightful and informative book.*

Priscilla Weaver, Saltmarsh Ranch

If you'd said “llama” to me five years ago, the word would have conjured up images of a foreign pack animal, perhaps trekking along New England's forested mountain trails and ferrying in the picnics of urban day hikers. Or it might summon up the picturesque, well-groomed living lawn ornaments of budding gentleman farmers.

My limited knowledge of this cousin-to-a-camel was soon to change. I was about to become a shepherd again after a three-year hiatus from keeping sheep. Through a series of miracles, friends, and fate, my merino sheep and I were to live on a large farm with abundant fields, good barn space for my (now small) flock, and a welcoming house and studio space for me.

The single drawback to this arrangement was that I would be living almost half a mile from where the animals would be kept and pastured. A sizable population of foxes, fishers, and coyotes roamed the woods, wetland, and fields in between.

I needed a reliable guard animal to tend the sheep, without offending the walkers and joggers who also enjoyed this pleasant country road. A barking guard dog would be intimidating, a donkey too noisy and independent, and a permanent electrified fence was too expensive.

“Have you considered getting a llama?” asked a fellow shepherd. And so I set out to visit a llama-breeding farm in southwestern Vermont. Six hours and thirty close encounters-of-the-llama-kind later, I was cautiously smitten by Fleetwood Mac, a six-foot tall vegetarian with brown eyes you could swim in and a cocoa-colored woolly fleece that was a fiber lover's dream. His serene nature and energetic prance made him stately in a camelid kind of way. But, “Make no mistake,” his breeder assured me. The merest hint of canine misbehavior would almost certainly trigger Mac's aggressive guarding behavior.

Mac was not fond of being touched, but after a few successful “catch and haltering” practices, my anxiety about handling him segued into confidence that we might be a good team. I signed on the dotted line and arranged a delivery date.

After living without my sheep for three years, the euphoria of setting up “farm” again soon became tinged with trepidation and buyer’s remorse. What was I thinking? Keeping sheep was hard enough, but here I was taking on an expensive guard animal on faith. Would the llama do his work? Was this my right work?

Mac was delivered to the farm on the same cloudy November day my eight sheep arrived. Mac’s entrance was auspicious. Unfolding himself from the back of the pickup truck, he stood tall, scoping out the barnyard with proprietary calm.

The correct way to greet a llama is to clasp your hands behind your back and lean forward, to gauge the limit of his personal space. I did. Unblinking, Mac looked me square in the eye, stretched forward and granted me a gentle but inquisitive sniff on my forehead. Nose to nose, we sized each other up. I was mesmerized by his huge intelligent eyes, extraordinary eyelashes, velvety muzzle, and unabashed curiosity. His long rabbitlike ears flicked comically as he studied me likewise.

We took a stroll along the paddock driveway, me giving him plenty of rope, he not taking advantage of a loose lead line and my tentative regard. Equal partners. His response to everything he encountered was gentle but assured. So far, so good.

Tucking him into the stall with the sheep for the evening, I watched them shuffle around each other with startled curiosity. I fervently hoped for an easy bonding and for Mac’s guarding instinct to click into gear. He had never even seen sheep! Faced with a coyote or an aggressive dog, could pure instinct really provoke an effective response?

“Reading” Mac’s behavior for evidence of his guarding instinct became the neighborhood pastime. The phone began ringing with Mac stories. My neighbors Barbara and Roy reported the details of their first Mac visit. Sure enough, as they approached the fence that first day, Mac planted himself between them and the flock. “Yup,” crowed Roy, “he’s gonna guard all right.”

And Mac did. He gave every passing dog the evil eye. At the least sign of anything out of order, including me wearing sunglasses or a new hat, Mac herded the sheep into the barn. Visitors bearing carrots were treated with a slightly goofy but beneficent deference. Discriminating and dutiful, he assumed the role of bouncer and butler without missing a beat.

In early December, the weather turned sharply cold and windy overnight. One morning, I entered the paddock through the lower gate, pulling it shut but not hitching it closed. I’d be leaving that way soon. First, I enjoyed the simple pleasure of my work – feeding out good hay to the sheep, energetic and hungry on a bitter morning. Mac, however, was humming with concern around my oldest sheep, Belle. Frail and beloved, she was suffering from the abruptness of this cold snap.

There is always a moment that anyone who keeps animals experiences when they add a new animal to their life. That moment when suddenly you understand they have become firmly

woven into your heart and life. Right then, watching Mac buffer Belle from the push and shove of the morning feeding frenzy, I felt my heart open. I had come to simply adore this solicitous good-natured beast.

I had to make a decision on Belle's behalf immediately. Quite upset, I left the barn by a different gate to think through the options and then consult the vet. Not long after, a neighbor was pounding on my front door: "The llama is loose and running this way!"

I jumped into the car nearly in tears. The prospect of losing two animals in one day was unbearable. How do you catch a llama on the run? If he went too far, how would he find home again? I drove toward the farm and there was Mac, running in my direction in the field alongside the road.

Was this dumb luck or did he understand this was the direction I approached the barn from, twice a day? I jammed on the brakes, rolled down the window and shouted. He stopped. We took a long look at each other and then I started driving to the barn, praying he would follow.

In a moment worthy of a National Geographic special, Mac spun around and kept pace with me, floating along in a determined gallop, neck outstretched and eyes dead ahead, right up to the wide-open gate swinging in the wind. We stepped into the paddock, Mac snorting as if in reprimand, and then high-stepping his way up to the barn to count our sheep. At that moment I was sure of two things: Mac had intentionally fetched me to close the gate; and for that, I loved him absolutely.

One evening not long after, I arrived at the barn after a powdery snowfall, looking forward to chores and checking on Belle's recovery. The sky was inky blue, the air soft and still. Mac wafted down to the gate in the pale night to escort me up to the barn and the sheep.

I always enjoyed this nightly ritual, and tonight, the snow and peace added to the pleasure. Following Mac, tracing his deliberate steps with my own, I realized his path was not a straight line from point A to B, but a pleasing forty paces of serpentine, meandering grace. Mac not only knew his work, he delighted in it: a gentleman of a guard and a poet as well.