

2004

### Getting a Llama

Mandy Simoneau

Follow this and additional works at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_rev](https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Simoneau, Mandy (2004). Getting a Llama. *Undergraduate Review*, 1, 58-61.  
Available at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_rev/vol1/iss1/14](https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol1/iss1/14)

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.  
Copyright © 2004 Mandy Simoneau

# Getting a Llama

by Mandy Simoneau

*Mandy Simoneau graduated from Bridgewater in 2004 with a B.A. in English and a concentration in Writing. She produced this piece for Jerald Walker's Short Story class in Fall 2003. She hopes to pursue an M.F.A. and a career in Fiction Writing.*

Her husband John found a mouse struggling in the yard and brought it in. He figured it had a broken leg and that a little nursing would have it scurrying again. Danae quietly watched as he set up a cardboard box with a soft washcloth blanket, a bottle cap water dish, and a few crumbles of cheese. The mouse shivered in the corner of the box. Her heart hurt a little watching it all. She hoped it would turn out okay. She sighed, and she hoped.

John had always wanted a llama, for as long as she had known him, and longer. When he was a child, he had read an article about how the frosted-blond movie star Kim Novak had imported them from Chile. He was fascinated. He started reading all about them, about llamas and about Novak. He collected pictures. The llama and the star seemed to swirl into each other until the two together represented one dizzying helix of mystery: the mystery of intimacy. He felt a connection, an attraction, not sensual but magnetic. The llama, to him, became a symbol of what he so yearned for: the ability to connect. They had clicked long ago, when he was a child, and the connection was electric and organic.

John first met a llama at a small, shabby petting



zoo. He stood for hours gripping the splintery wood of the llama pen, transfixed by the animal's curious stare. It stood about six feet from him and stared, it seemed, right at him. He stared back and knew the llama liked him. He felt a current of energy between them. It was the type of connectedness that he had always longed for, the type that he had never had with other people. But with the llama he knew how to be. He wanted to hug the shaggy animal and kiss its soft nose, but up close, he found himself a bit frightened by the llama's size so he just nodded at it, smiling. He vowed that he would someday have a llama of his own.

Danae remembered when they had first started dating, and John lost his job. He was twenty-four and worked at a harborside restaurant. The owners sometimes squeezed in a morning wedding before opening for the regular dinner rush to increase profits. In September, the summer swell had ended and the seasonal workers had all gone back to school. This made for long, exhausting days for the limited wait staff.

John was a good waiter. His customers always seemed to like the quiet way about him and his dimpled smile. On that day, the wedding had run late, and the staff had to scramble to ready the restaurant for dinner. As he rushed into the kitchen to fix a salad he had forgotten, he collided with the head chef, who had just emerged from the walk-in cooler with a tray full of chicken breasts. As the poultry toppled to the floor, each piece landing with a fleshy splat, John clenched his eyes shut. He stood there, eyes closed, for about five seconds. He opened them to gasps and murmurs and finally, a hushed silence. The chef approached quickly, backed John up against the wall, and barked at him in Portuguese. He gripped a boning knife tightly, and the point just poked through her husband's starched uniform shirt and pricked his stomach. John looked into

the chef's eyes and saw a blurriness that scared him. He reached out and placed his hand lightly on the chef's shoulder. At first, this leaning caused the knife to jab into him a bit more, but when he spoke gently to the chef, the knife shook a little and then fell away. The chef's eyes cleared.

John lost that job. The management said that someone had to be fired after such a violent incident or the rest of the staff wouldn't feel safe coming to work. The chef was too integral to the success of the restaurant to part with. Her husband accepted this quietly. He didn't make a scene, he didn't storm out, and he didn't threaten to sue. He did stop at two restaurants on his way home to submit applications. He was hired by one the next day.

She watched him check on the mouse over and over again – every half-hour or so at first, and then more often. It seems happy to be in a warm house, he said. He thought it was getting better. Really, it was slowing down. She could see it slowing down, but when she asked her husband about it, he said that it was probably just grateful to have the chance to rest a bit. Mice spend their lives evading predators.

Just about a year before the mouse appeared, John's father died. He was an old man. He was forty when John was born and had fathered two other children after that. He was too old to be a new father, even then. He had particular routines for everything in his life, and he thought the children interfered with all of them. In truth, John had never been much of an interference to anyone. He was quiet and mostly avoided his father. Consequently, his father always thought of him as strange. It never occurred to the old man that he simply didn't know his son or that his son felt that ideas, thoughts, and words, unless exceptionally brilliant, were better off kept to oneself. So



they lived separately even when they lived together, and when John grew up and moved away, he felt no real difference in his life other than that silence was suddenly comfortable rather than strained. At the time of his father's death, John realized that he had not spoken to him in almost a year. This wasn't the result of any specific incident or disagreement. Actually, it was more of an agreement. It was their normal way of doing things. The pancreatic cancer had done its work fast, and three weeks after John learned of the diagnosis from his sister, his father died. On every day of those three weeks, he had been sure that he would call his father. He kept waiting to find himself picking up the receiver and dialing. He thought that even though he had never really spoken to his father, words of wisdom and solace would suddenly pour forth when the lines connected. But he never made the call. It was his sister, again, who called him to say that their father had died at about seven o'clock in the morning in a putrid smelling hospital room with just a nurse at his side. Neither knew what to say, and both just hung up quietly after the news was delivered. Danae remembered how he just looked at her, lost.

She hadn't thought of that day in a long time, but she felt a glimmer of it as she watched him with the mouse. It wouldn't drink its water. John dipped a Q-tip into the bottle cap, wetting it, and pressed it to the mouse's tiny mouth. It made little yawning faces as he did this, but she couldn't tell if these were just involuntary muscular movements. It reminded her of a baby bird, beak open, waiting for its mother's catch. Maybe the mouse was getting better. Maybe when she got up in the morning, it would be zipping around its box. All of the cheese would be gone, the water lapped up. They would get an old fish tank out of the garage and fill it with sawdust and a running wheel.

They had been married for a year when his friend Dominick died. She remembered the call as she watched John bent over the cardboard box, tending to the mouse. Things hadn't worked out for his friend. Of the two of them, Dominick married first but never seemed to evolve into the person he needed to be to become a husband. He thought it would happen automatically, he had told John. He thought he would just start to feel like someone's husband and that it would change him. But it didn't change him. Not in the right way, anyway. Things got worse when the couple had a child. In the little boy's eyes, Dominick saw his own eyes as they were in his youth, before cocaine had blotted them out and destroyed his soul. He told John this. But this self-awareness wasn't enough to heal Dominick. He knew he was getting more and more lost, but he no longer cared about getting found.

When finally his wife banned him from the house her parents had given to them as a wedding gift and cut off his access to their child, Dominick gave up. He doused himself and his car with gasoline, got in, and lit a match. He burned up with spectators watching. Those who had seen him set the fire (it happened so fast) were so sickened with horror that they were frozen. Those passersby who thought it was an accident couldn't get close enough to help due to the fierceness of the flames. A dark parking lot was made daylight by the death of a very sad man, and people just stood and watched.

Danae had answered the phone when the wife called. It was early in the morning, earlier than they usually got up, but they were awakened that morning by the constant ringing of the telephone. John watched her, saw the phone pressed to her ear and saw the filtered morning light dance on her face, but he couldn't hear what was being said. Danae just kept saying "what? what?" in what sounded like disbelief, and then she handed



the phone to her husband. She couldn't tell him about Dominick. She made the wife relay the awful details a second time because she couldn't tell him herself.

John slowly rose as he listened. Danae heard him say "oh, god" a couple of times, but mostly he just stood leaning against the sliding glass door, shaking his head. She sat on the bed and tried not to throw up.

For the rest of that day, until dusk, they sat in their living room quietly thinking of death. She made a few attempts to console him, but her heart didn't feel in it. The words died on her lips as she looked at his unfocused eyes. So they sat. She on the couch and he in the chair, not touching but sharing the sickening experience like they shared the leaden air of the room.

The mouse was barely moving. Danae looked at her husband a couple of times as if to say, 'he's gone,' but then every few minutes the mouse twitched, and John insisted that it was just sleeping. Because mice sleep too. Especially mice with busted legs that have been heroically rescued and given safe havens from the perils of vast, grassy yards. She sighed and stared down at her feet. John didn't look at her. He just gazed into the box at the tiny gray fuzzy thing and stroked it with his pinkie finger. She kissed the back of his neck and shuffled off to the sanctuary of bed. She couldn't see it through. She was too exhausted, too spent. She crawled into bed and felt, for a moment, relief. Then she thought of her husband, still in the living room, the same room in which he had endured so much death. He was alone. In her mind, she saw him still bent over that cardboard box, unable to move away from it. She knew he wouldn't just walk away from it. He had put himself in a position where he had to witness death firsthand. She knew that every cell of him was breathing that mouse's breath and

feeling its tiny mouse feelings. He couldn't save it, but he couldn't abandon it either. He was trying to take the pain from it. He was so much bigger than the mouse. He was two thousand times as big. He was willing the mouse to give him its pain. Pain that would kill a mouse wouldn't hurt a man. Her heart ached for him, but she couldn't go to him. She rolled over in the big, half empty bed, cried, and fell asleep.

When Danae woke up the next morning, he was asleep beside her. The skin around his eyes looked tender and sallow, and she kissed his eyelids before slipping soundlessly out of bed. She slid down the hall, wanting to go straight to the kitchen as always to make some tea but instead veering off at the doorway to the living room. The box was still there. It sat in the corner, the site of her husband's long vigil. She felt nervous. She didn't want to cross the room, but she did anyway and peered into the box. Empty. She pressed her lips together. She thought of what a lonely task it must have been for him. To first take out the mouse gently, so gently. To carry it somewhere where it would stay forever, to choose that spot, and to lay it down gingerly, as if to not hurt it. To then fold up the blanket that was really just an old washcloth, toss the bottle cap that had been a life source, and shake the crumbled cheese into the trash. She thought of him doing all of this, wordlessly and alone. She gazed out onto their carefully manicured lawn and pictured a splintery wooden llama pen there. He had eased the mouse's pain, and the mouse, from the ground and through divine grace, would give him something in thanks.