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My birthday gift to myself? A little black sheep

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For my 36th birthday, I bought myself a black ram. He's a runt, born last spring and about the size of a mid-sized dog, possibly stunted in his growth because of the early loss of his mother and having been kicked in the head by a donkey as a lamb.

My farmer friend didn't know what to do with him, as he was both too small and too old to be worth selling for meat, and he had already acted as stud for her ewes – not what she had originally planned.

So I told my friend I'd buy him from her. His survival against the odds and small stature combined to give him underdog cachet, and my farm needed a mascot.

Farming was a major career change for me after years of working in the financial industry. I've now spent three years growing several acres of organic vegetables on a 40-acre property northwest of Toronto.

The ram was brought to my farm the first weekend in July, just in time to join my birthday celebrations. We wrestled him off the truck and carried him to an area I had fenced in for him with moveable electric fencing.

It soon became clear that he had a distinctive voice – an insistent “baa” that sounded like a hoarse burp, possibly emitted by a crude Morgan Freeman. The ram didn't take well to being moved to my farm, removed from his flock with only a few free-range chickens for company and no other sheep in sight. He baaed, a lot.

After a few days of familiarization, I was able to handle him enough to attach a collar so I could take him out to graze on a leash attached to a heavy tire. And that started our daily grazing moves, by far the least efficient way

to manage sheep, considering the amount of time spent moving the tire for a single animal. I also sometimes took him on off-leash walks to my vegetable field or to go wild apple picking. I imagine he looked just like a large dog to anyone who might have seen us from the road.

As the summer went by, I got used to his insistent baaing, his favourite greens to graze, his constant need for attention. The name Ramses eventually stuck.

He gave me a good scare once. I had forgotten to bring him in before it got dark and when I went to get him, it turned out his leash had detached from the tire and he was on the loose. Ever tried looking for an all-black sheep on a dark country night? Luckily, he hadn't strayed far and must have been glad to see me because he baaed as I hurried by.

I was fairly diligent when Ramses first arrived not to pat him on the head in hopes of preventing him from becoming a butting sort of ram. But occasionally, when he feels ornery, he will get a running start and butt me, usually resulting in a charley horse. I make sure never to turn my back on him whenever he's off-leash.

That said, when he has company, he's a friendly little ram indeed. At the farm's open house in September, he was a hit with the kids – there are even pictures of my baby niece riding on his back.

It was always my intention to get a companion for Ramses, but my work growing organic vegetables didn't leave me much time to find him a friend until the end of the growing season. Luckily, when I did start to look, a neighbour was selling his flock and I was able to buy a ewe from him. Upon her arrival in November, Ramses became an almost silent sheep.

I soon find out my new ewe is an escape artist. In the first few days of her arrival, I was made aware of every weakness in my winter sheep fencing. I named the ewe Agnes Macphail, after Canada's first female MP (clearly a person with some spunk), who came from my neck of the woods, Grey County.

I thought I had blocked any potential fence holes, but then I was woken one Sunday morning by loud knocking on my door. A passing motorist had stopped to let me know that my sheep were on the loose and had crossed the road. I quickly put on my winter clothes and ran off in hot pursuit.

I found them in my neighbour's woods and walked them back to my farm by essentially dragging Ramses by the fleece, with Agnes following quite docilely. I had a nervous moment when Ramses stopped in the middle of the road and I almost had to pick him up to keep him moving.

After getting them back, I found the sheep had lifted a post and collapsed that part of the fence. Clearly, the electrical part of the fencing had stopped working. Once I fixed that, I replaced the sheep's hay with a new bale. I had noticed a day or so before that they weren't eating much hay, but assumed they were being picky and would eat it when they were hungry enough. Apparently not. Yet another lesson learned.

Now I'm on lamb watch. Agnes was in with some rams in October at her previous farm, so chances are good she's pregnant and due to lamb some time this month. Without getting an ultrasound done, it's hard to know for sure if a sheep is pregnant until a few weeks before they give birth. So I'm glued to my property this winter, nervously anticipating my farm's first lambing.

I hadn't planned to get into animal husbandry so early in my farming career, and it has certainly had its challenges. But when I go to give Ramses and Agnes their daily grain treats, they come running to greet me, and Agnes will even jump around with the four-footed hop of a little lamb. Definitely makes a Grey County winter more bearable to have some animals around. I'm happy with where my initial birthday whim has taken me.

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