



Dedicated to helping LGBTQ people build and strengthen their families.

Then Along Came Gertrude

Vince Sgambati

When Jack and I adopted Mona, we were still living in the country with three sheep, a goat, two old dogs and two ancient cats. We had full-time jobs and a 50-minute commute to and from work with a colicky infant screaming in the back seat of our car. Something had to go. Feeling a bit overwhelmed, I contemplated volunteering myself, but Jack decided that we should get rid of the ram instead. He was ornery, and things were never the same between us since I castrated him (the ram, not Jack).

Giving the ram to a farmer down the road was only the beginning. Within the next few years we had to have our dogs and cats put down: first our oldest dog (fourteen-years-old); next our oldest cat (twenty-one). When Mona was a few months short of three-years-old, we moved into the city, so of course our two ewes and goat had to go by way of the ram. We had our second cat (eighteen) put down right before we moved.

Next, my parents came to live with us; they were in their 90's. My father had suffered several strokes, and he had advanced dementia. As parents, we weren't into sheltering Mona from the more difficult aspects of life, but between aging and dying animals, then my parents moving in, it felt as if we had skipped right over sheltering Mona onto bombarding her. Soon after my parents moved in, we had our last dog put down, and within a year my father passed away. I don't mean to compare my father's death to the death of our pets, or suggest that any of these losses were unexpected, but we feared that too much in Mona's young life paralleled the milieu of a nursing home.

While obsessing over how to bring balance into our daughter's life, we happened to visit a friend in a senior citizens apartment complex - nice place, except for the memorial bulletin board in the lobby, displaying photographs of recently deceased tenants. I was reminded of my childhood preoccupations with death, like the time I asked my parents for an Extreme Unction crucifix for my twelfth birthday. For those of you who have been spared an Italian catholic upbringing in the 50's and 60's, it's a cross with the image of Jesus nailed to it. The cross slides up to expose secret compartments for candles and holy water, used by a priest to administer last rites to dying Catholics. My parents didn't view this as an odd request from their twelve-year-old son, but then they had watched me choreograph elaborate funerals for goldfish, my friends and I marching in processions while singing Ave Maria.

continued on page 2

Fortunately I outgrew my morbid bent, but when I noticed Mona examining a stack of bulletin boards in Home Depot, I thought of the memorial display in our friend's senior citizen complex. It was time for an intervention. I wasn't going to have our daughter spend her formative years tacking up photographs of dead animals and people. We needed to increase the number of young family members in our home. Jack balked at my suggestion of a second child, so a puppy would have to do.

Mona was four when we got Dusty. As with many good intentions, an unanticipated problem arose. Whenever Jack or Mona called Dusty, he'd look at them like *you've got to be kidding* and jump into my lap. I guess I emit some kind of doggy dominance pheromone. Unfortunately, Dusty's attachment to me caused all kinds of Mona drama.

Young animal number two was Lightning the guinea pig – Mona's birthday gift when she turned eight. No danger of me bonding with a guinea pig. As a kid, the only animal I ever hated was a hamster I hid in my parent's attic. It was a nasty little rodent that curled its top lip back and lunged at me every time I went near it. I was relieved the morning I found it missing, although, for years afterward, I had nightmares about an enormous hamster hiding in my bedroom walls, planning its revenge.

Mona still whined about Dusty ignoring her, and I have to admit Lightning was not much consolation. Chewing, peeing and pooping seemed to be the extent of his interests. Fast-forward about twenty months - enter Gertrude the schnoodle, an adorable eight-week-old schnauzer-poodle mix.

We've done a pretty good job decreasing the median age in our household, but whom Gertrude primarily bonds with is still up for grabs. Our hope is that Mona, being older, will be more involved in caring for this puppy, and, consequently, the puppy will grow to feel a stronger connection to her. Of course we also hope that Mona will eventually remember to place the shower curtain inside the bathtub whenever she showers, so we don't have to paint over the water marks on the kitchen ceiling for the third time.