

THE WAY LLAMAS BREATHE

A paper banner sagged over the fairground billboard, its red, white, and blue lettering runny from the drizzling rain. Though the outlines were vague and drab, the message was invitingly clear: WELCOME TO THE SECOND ANNUAL LLAMA EXTRAVAGANZA.

Emil bit down hard on this thumb. "Oh, jeez," he whispered. "You weren't kidding."

While she maneuvered the turn, Gina tossed the map of Wisconsin into the back seat of her Buick Electra. "You're gonna love the llamas, Emil."

He sneezed. "Look," he said, holding up his red, blotchy hands for inspection. "I'm already getting a reaction."

Gina wanted to tell him that his allergies were all in his head, but she didn't want to nag. "It's going to be perfect. Just wait."

But Emil didn't want to wait. He wanted to be home alone in his bed, drinking tea and staring at his feet. Now there were three things about Gina that annoyed him. She thought Sunday drives were fun, and she liked surprises (that was why she kept their destination a secret). And then this. She actually thought that something could be perfect.

They pulled into a gravel parking lot filled with livestock trailers and customized recreational vehicles. Some had personalized spare tires hooked onto the back that said things like "Bob and Betty's Colorado Packers" and "Llowe's LllamaLland."

A cowboy with a silver llama head belt buckle took Gina's ten dollar bill and felt-penned an X on the backs of their hands. As they walked through the gate, Gina planted a tiny kiss on Emil's cheek. "Thanks for coming with me," she said, her voice childlike and breathy. She grabbed his arm and nuzzled his armpit with her nose.

Emil's nostrils flared and a tumultuous sneeze exploded into the air. He wiped his nose with a red handkerchief and pulled away from Gina's grasp on his elbow.

Their first date had lasted three days and ended with words of love. Now, on the fifth day of their relationship, he wasn't sure if

he liked her at all. She kept wanting to touch him.

A cowgal with a buckskin jacket handed them programs. "Pretty cool," Gina said. She thumbed through the pages and took stock of the day's programming. That afternoon, there would be a llama rodeo, a llama auction, and a llama breeding lecture. It would be well worth the price of admission.

A tumbleweed of white llama hair rolled past them, and Emil clasped both hands over his nose. "Ahhh-chooo!"

"I have a theory about people who think they're allergic to animals," Gina said.

Emil ignored her. He had discovered yet another source of annoyance. Gina spouted "theories."

As they turned down a muddy path, Gina's mouth opened wide, and she stopped dead in her tracks. Never before had she seen such a spectacle. Llamas. Thousands of them. Tall, elegant creatures meandered freely around the fairgrounds. White ones, brown ones, dotted ones. Some were babies, some were more than six feet tall. It was nothing less than magnificent.

"Oh, Emil," she sighed as she reached out to take his hand.

But he sneezed again, his body thrown into convulsions. Once the spasms stopped, Gina turned to him and laughed. "Maybe it's me," she said. He sneezed again.

They passed a collection of llama breeders who were brushing and vacuuming their animals, preparing them for the show. Gina was fearless and met one large black llama nose to nose. Drool ran from its fleshy lips. It batted its long lashes and quietly mooed at her.

"He likes me!" Gina giggled, letting the animal press its snout against her cheek. It breathed in deep staccato rhythms to examine her scent. When it was done with its sniffing, it sighed and turned away.

As Gina and Emil wandered through the fairgrounds, the smells of wet hay and steamy feces seeped into their clothes, and Emil dreamed of going home. He itched, imagining millions of microscopic bugs burrowing into his skin. He sneezed and sneezed and sneezed. His sinuses throbbed.

"Look at this guy," Gina said, stooping down to a tiny white llama. It curved its neck around hers and buried its face into Gina's scalp, panting through its nose. "Tickles," she laughed. She went to touch it, but it pushed her away.

Gina had loved llamas practically her entire life--ever since her

first trip to the zoo. The event was documented by 24 black-and-white photographs of her father and herself--a miniature Gina in banana curls and a polka dot romper--feeding grapes to the llamas in the children's zoo. Gina remembered (only because her mother told her) that she cried all the way home that day because her parents told her she could never have one of her very own.

Emil kept measured distances from Gina and from the animals. He couldn't stand the thought of their wet noses examining his flesh.

One breeder sensed Emil's discomfort and patted him on the back. "Act like you're not interested in them, son, and they'll leave you alone."

Emil wished that women had such refined sensibilities.

Gina wandered among the animals, hesitantly petting their thick wool, feeding them bunches of long, wet grass, sniffing them back when they sniffed at her. But each contact was fleeting. The llamas easily tired of her attention. Preoccupied, she didn't notice that Emil had gone ahead of her.

Without his realizing it, Emil was changing. He mimicked the graceful postures of the smug animals, walking with a new grace, his neck stretched long. Each step became carefully constructed elegance. Each turn of his head was slow and sweeping. Now, the lids of his eyes drooped at half mast, and he disdainfully watched the activity around him. The llamas nodded approvingly at his aloof restraint and kept their distance from him.

With Gina out of reach, he had stopped sneezing.

Over at the cinder track, ten unfortunate llamas were having their dignity challenged by facing an obstacle course of sorts. There was a kiddie pool, a high jump pole set at about three feet, and tires laid down in even rows.

The emcee was announcing, "We're not looking for fancy tricks here in this kind of competition. What we're looking at is trust between the animal and the human. We're looking at their rapport."

A teenaged girl in a skin-tight jumpsuit and fringed cowboy boots tried to lead her llama through the course, but it stopped short in front of the kiddie pool, refusing to walk through the water. The girl pulled and yanked at the lead, but the llama still refused. She even went at it from behind and pushed on its wide, woolly rump. The curiosity seekers in the audience laughed. The llama experts expressed consolation with knowing nods. The non-competing llamas looked on, embarrassed for their species.

Gina searched the grounds for Emil. She finally realized she

had lost him in the crowd.

"Thing is about llamas," the emcee continued, "is that they don't see the sense of getting into something when they can easily avoid it."

Gina leaned on the fence and watched the next failed try to get a llama through the course. Then she spotted Emil from across the track, his face blending with the detached expressions of the animals. As the human spectators applauded and laughed, Emil found harmony with the silent and controlled.

"And now for our third round of competition," the emcee announced.

Just then, there was a loud crash of thunder and rain came splashing down. Gina raised her arms above her head and waved at Emil. "C'mon," she yelled. "Let's get to the car."

Emil looked at her with a bored gaze. He blinked once, slowly, languidly, then looked away. The people took cover, running this way and that, but the llamas and Emil seemed not to notice the change in weather. They remained calm, oblivious. They looked around, annoyed by the human commotion.

Gina signalled to Emil again. "Come on!"

He turned his back and disappeared in the field, his head held high.

Gina sat in the car and watched the drops of rain roll down the window. One drop would join another to form a rivulet for a split second, and the stream would dart down the window until it attached to another drop. The random connections and departures moved faster, more frenetically.

A llama sidled up against the side of Gina's car and she rolled down her window.

"Hi, little guy," she whispered. When she spoke, her voice cracked. She hadn't realized she was on the verge of tears.

The llama put his head into the car and began sniffing her ear and her hair. It hummed its low moo and wiped her forehead with a quick, sloppy lick. Just as she was about to smile and sniff it back, the llama turned away, its curiosity satisfied. It stood perfectly still and gazed out to the horizon.

Gina rolled up her window and stared at the rain splattered glass for a long time. Finally, with a quiet breath, she put the key into the ignition and started the motor.

Emil was gone forever. He would never be hers.

And not for the first time, Gina would cry all the way home.