

SONOMA

A man and a woman are standing next to a large camel in a wooded area. The camel is brown and has a black halter with a white ring. The man is wearing a blue and white checkered shirt and has his arms crossed. The woman is wearing a blue shirt and has blonde hair. They are both smiling at the camera.

Camel
love

sonomamag.com

\$6.95 winter 2009/10



barrel beer | wood & wine
\$1000 sheets | offbeat gifts



Hump-Free, a member of the Lyon menagerie, extends lips for (a) an affectionate kiss, or (b) the carrot Rob Lyon holds in his teeth. Either way it's a uniquely intimate animal experience.

STORY JANET GRAY VOLKMAN
PHOTOS ROBBIE PENGELLY

Camel love



It starts with a kiss, the common denominator of love. Lips touch, some energizing message is exchanged that reaches past the mouth, befuddles the brain and penetrates the heart. As with almost every experience of first love, the act releases a cocktail of emotion—excitement, wonder, recognition, surprise.

Lips touch again The feeling is beyond understanding. The act is outside the range of reason. It is strange and wonderful.

You are kissing a camel.

In the hills west of town, down a bumpy lane of overhanging oaks, there's a place you'll probably never find. If some day, by chance, you stumble through the gate just as the sun begins to melt the morning mist, you will think you've entered a land of fairy tales and later you'll wonder if, like Shangri-la, it was real or only a dream.

Dare to enter and little horses will come to greet you at the fence. A strange glittery



Above: More animal intimacy: A randy harlequin macaw named Theo sneaks a peek inside Robin's shirt. At any one time the Lyons have more than 40 parrots, not all of them voyeurs.

Opposite: There is a palpable feeling of affection between the Lyons and their hoofed, clawed and feathered friends, especially when Rob arrives with food.

bird, as tall as your chest, will gurgle a low drumming sound as you pass. Odd spotted cats will scamper under foot as balloon-sized Popsicles hang from the trees. A donkey with striped zebra legs will stand cuddling under a camel, whose giant brown eye catches yours and, you're not sure, but you think his rubbery lips curl into a smile. Clearly, it must be a dream. Or, more accurately, a love story. An interspecies, many-faceted love story. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Young Robin Wolf, now 56, grew up on a farm in Napa with four siblings, seven foster siblings, a passel of pigs, goats, horses and Strawberry Milkshake, her personal cat. In the first years, they all lived in a chicken coop, "a cool way to grow up," Robin insists. Eventually she went to UC Davis and studied animal behavioral science, which nourished the dream of someday having her own ranch.

She imagined it in great detail: orchards of pear and plum and apple, wide sunny pastures, big shady oaks, a house, a simple barn, maybe a creek running by, and animals, all the animals she wanted.

The dream didn't die. After college Robin became a flight attendant (they called them "stewardesses" back then), and whenever she flew into San Francisco she'd get a Rent-A-Wreck and rattle up to Sonoma to look at land.

Realtors thought she was nuts and her dad said, "This is not going to happen," especially when she fell for a 12-acre parcel on Sonoma Mountain with a creek but no road that wasn't for sale.

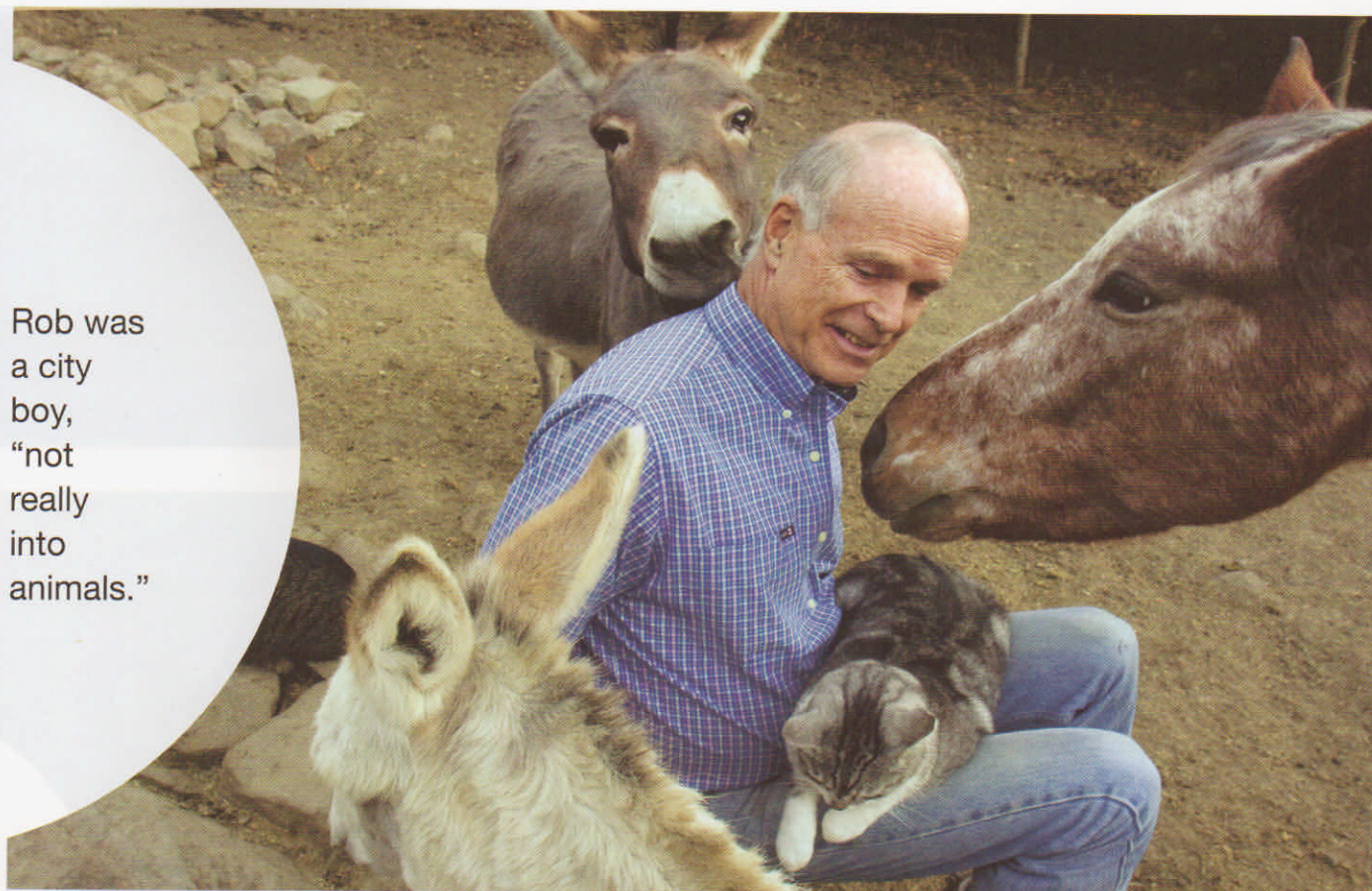
But she went to the recorder's office, found out who owned it and, trembling, made the fateful phone call.

"Did you see a for sale sign?" the dubious owner asked in a not-very friendly voice. Nervous, she rambled on about her dream—the orchards, the oaks, the animals. He was silent. Finally he took her phone number, and she thought he probably didn't even write it down.

A month later he called. "I had a dream once, too," he said.

From her flight attendant salary she had scraped together \$7,400 by living on passenger meals and taking some of them home. It was enough for the down payment.

Rob was
a city
boy,
“not
really
into
animals.”



Four years later she met commercial airline pilot Rob Lyon at a layover in Calgary. She was lavishly, wholesomely blond, he had clear blue eyes, a square chin and the bearing you'd expect in someone who flies big planes. The odd pairing of their last names—two iconic, wild species—apparently didn't alert either to what lay ahead.

He was a “city boy” from Orange County, says Robin, but the connection grew, and one day she told him to come back when he had an old hunting dog, a pickup truck and a chainsaw. Ten days later, he did.

They married in Sonoma at the Mission, but there was still the little issue of Robin's dream. They would picnic on her land but, she admitted to herself, “Rob's not really into animals.”

Rob and Robin rented a house on Arnold Drive, putting them closer to the land, but both were still flying and based in Salt Lake City. They admired a home there and, in an act of unexpected serendipity, the builder handed them the plans.

It was a sign and an opportunity. Instead

of Salt Lake, a house began slowly rising from the mists on Sonoma Mountain, a house surrounded by shady oaks, facing sunny pastures with a creek running past. They moved in before it was done, took sponge baths at gas stations, and Lyon Ranch moved from imagination into some semblance of reality.

That's when the dream took shape and the real story began. Rob and Robin had a son, Billie, and a daughter, named Lynette, and Robin started taking in abandoned animals. First it was just a goat named Pickles, a dog or two, a few cats, one horse. Rob was skeptical. He had young children now, he'd never had an animal, not even a cat and, Robin says, “He didn't get it.”

But that started to change. “It didn't take long to see how neat animals are,” says Rob. “I learned from Robin how to approach them, how to deal with them, and all of a sudden they come up to you and brush against you.”

Then Rob had an animal epiphany. Lyon Ranch acquired a horse someone couldn't keep and she turned out to be pregnant. When it came time for

the mare to deliver, Robin was away so Rob assisted with the birth, even dealing with the placenta and all the yucky bits. "The mother trusted me so much," he remembers, and the doorway to interspecies love opened wide. The chestnut colt was named Rajah, it would do cute things like suckle on three-year old Lynette's nose, and Rob learned to work with it and see how the horse responded to him.

"Rob was the proud papa of that horse," says Robin. "It was because the mother trusted me so much," explains Rob.

The animals kept coming and there seemed to be no end in sight. They were all rescues—throwaways—many disabled in some way, some with owners who had died or were too ill to care for pets anymore.

More goats arrived, a blind turkey, dogs, spotted cats from Africa, miniature horses with shaggy coats, exotic birds with arthritic toes, parrots, lorries people just didn't want because they need too much attention (they eat only pollen) and "they live too long." One Lyon bird is 71 years old and two male, middle-aged, apparently gay parrots live together and constantly preen each other.

There is now a beautiful but pigeon-toed paint horse along with more donkeys and ZZ-Top, a donkey/zebra mix that wasn't supposed to happen. Dogs keep arriving, abandoned, angry, abused in one way or another. Slowly they learn to trust again, to know they are finally safe, as both Rob and Robin work with them, cuddle them, groom them, train them every day.

Meanwhile, Robin's parents were aging, and her mother developed dementia. Soon she needed extra care. They tried a board-and-care facility, they brought her home and hired caregivers, they tried a retirement home with skilled nursing. Nothing seemed to fit. Separated, her parents were both miserable with stress and uncertainty.

Rob and Robin canvassed the area





looking for a place that might work, traveling from rest home to nursing home to retirement community. But too often what they saw was despondency and suffering, people calling for help and not being answered. And everywhere there was loneliness. They saw old people with no visitors, no hope, no future, no desire to live anymore, never smiling, staring into space, sitting in wheelchairs next to a wall, waiting to die.

Little by little, Rob and Robin started going back to these facilities and bringing animals with them—at first just a kitten, a baby chick, maybe a dog. Then it was miniature horses, a talking parrot. They watched reactions, vacant eyes lighting up, smiles appearing where they hadn't been seen for weeks or months. A grouchy old man the nurses said to “leave alone” held a baby chick cradled in his big, stiff hands for two hours.

The Lyons began to see that the animal therapy they were doing had almost magical power, that it was actually changing lives. What they now call their “mission” became clear. “It’s a win, win, win” situation says Robin. The elderly are lifted by moments of joy, the animals get love and attention, and Rob and Robin get to feel they are doing something to help others.

Soon they were flooded with calls asking them to come to a facility or an event or a fundraiser, and the energy level at Lyon Ranch ramped up.

Then Robin’s dream took another turn. She read about a camel being trained as a therapy animal at Cornell University. To some people it would have sounded utterly incongruous, counter-intuitive, absurd. Robin, of course, was instantly enchanted. Rob was not.

Ever determined, Robin found a camel breeder in Caspar, Wyoming, with a newborn imminent, and announced she was taking the old pickup and horse trailer to bring it back. In the end, Rob couldn’t let

First it was just a kitten, a baby chick, maybe a dog. Then it was miniature horses, a talking parrot.

Images from the menagerie: Lots of parrots, two alpacas, an emu and a cervil-hybrid housecat.

I would feed
the baby
camel its
formula in a
bottle. The
first time,
Rob just
watched.
By the third
time, he was
feeding the
camel.



her go alone and the outcome changed him in ways he couldn't have imagined.

In short order Lyon Ranch had a three-day-old camel, and three days after that Kazzy made her first visit to the elderly at a retirement home in Boyes Springs. Within six days of her birth, Kazzy the camel, all-over fuzzy with not yet a hint of a hump, began charming the world. Especially Rob who, like most people, thought camels were "mean, nasty, and they spit."

Robin remembers clearly, "He said I was nuts, he said I was crazy, you can't do that with a camel."

During Kazzy's first 21 days on the ranch, either Rob or Robin slept in her stall every night. One or the other of them bottle-fed her at two hour intervals around the clock.

As Robin later reported to a TV audience, "I think Rob was surprised at what happened. I would feed the baby camel its formula in a bottle. The first time, he just watched. By the third time, he was feeding the camel. And it hasn't stopped."

Now, Robin told TV-land, "Rob and the camel are almost joined at the hip."

An unshakable bond developed while Kazzy grew into a 1,750-pound wonder-camel with two shaggy humps, eyes and eyelashes to die for and a penchant for people that was nothing short of amazing. There's hardly a person in Sonoma who hasn't seen her—walking on the bike path or across the Plaza, visiting Sonoma

Valley Hospital, easing through the door at nursing homes like London House, marching in the Fourth of July parade or looking out the back of her trailer and "smiling" at everything.

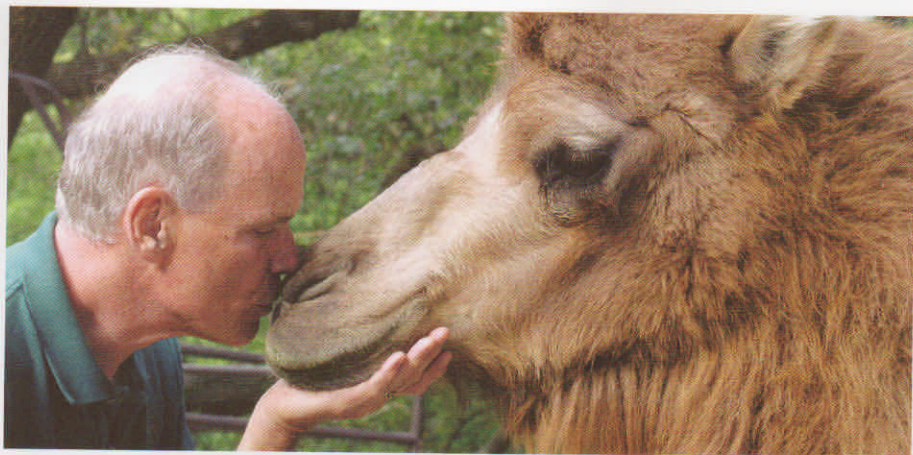
Some facilities were understandably skeptical. "What?" mimics Rob. "You want to bring a camel to a hospital?" But Kazzy, and the multi-species menagerie at Lyon Ranch have now generated so much demand that the Lyons have to restrict themselves to just three appearances a week. Otherwise the ranch work doesn't get done and there won't be time to replenish the giant frozen fruit popsicle balls hung in the trees for Kazzy to chew on.

The hospital visits broadened Kazzy's social skills, helping her learn how to back out of small rooms and ride in elevators, to the shock of those waiting at the selected floor.

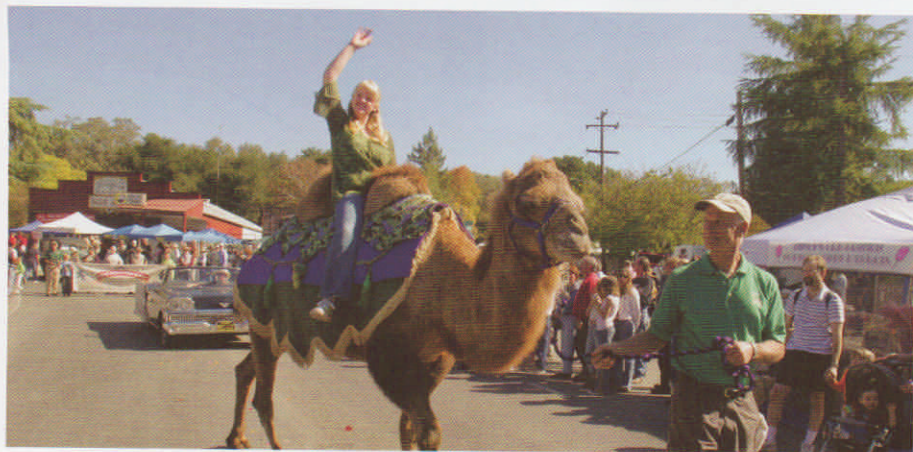
She learned to "kush," the international command to kneel, and to gently rest her head on someone's bed or lap. She stood without moving a muscle for a blind person to feel her all over while trying to figure out what she was.

And this is where it gets almost spooky. Kazzy seemed to have a kind of sixth sense—or maybe camel sense—about people. During a Fourth of July parade in Glen Ellen, she pulled away from Rob and went over to lay her head in the lap of a woman in a wheelchair, somehow sensing she needed the attention.

*Rob feeds ZZ
Top, a hybrid
zebra/donkey,
while Robin gives
a young Hump-
Free his formula.*



remembering
Kazzy



The Lyons
lost their
hearts to
Kazzy, and
Rob, the guy
who thought
getting a
camel was
crazy, was
especially
smitten.

On a visit to the Sonoma Developmental Center, Kazzy again demonstrated an uncanny intuition. After greeting all the patients who sat in a circle, she disobeyed Rob and pulled over to one girl, again and again as Rob tried to get her back in line. That night the girl Kazzy wouldn't leave passed away.

The stories multiplied through the years. Rob once stopped at an ice cream shop thinking Kazzy might want to stretch her legs. When he got her out of the trailer a woman approached and said, "My mother's dying. We're just bringing her home from the hospital for the last time. She would love to pet your camel, is that possible?"

The elderly woman was in the back seat on the far side of the car. Kazzy stuck her head in the window and stretched out her long neck to be within the woman's reach. Then she stayed in that awkward position, without even a twitch, for as long as the women wanted to pet her.

During a Kazzy visit, and for a while afterward, an elderly couple came out of the fog of dementia they'd been in for months and were able to recognize their son and interact with him normally one last time.

Every day brought another Kazzy surprise. Camels are supposed to be nasty—they spit, they kick. Not Kazzy. Not ever. With dogs, cats, children, birds, she was always gentle, always tolerant, even when Rob gave her a quick bath by taking her through a carwash.

The Lyons lost their hearts to Kazzy, and Rob, the guy who thought getting a camel was crazy, was especially smitten. First thing every morning he would walk outside to her enclosure and she would bend down and give him a sloppy kiss on the cheek. Every day.

Until the day he went out to her pen and Kazzy didn't stand up. It was just an infected tooth, it turned out, but the infection spread throughout her body, which became stressed by the necessary antibiotics and, shockingly, incomprehensibly, after the best treatment modern science and the world's top camel expert could provide, she died on September 17. She was only nine years old and might have lived to 30.

Rob and Robin were grief-stricken, the sense of loss felt bottomless, but they were heartened by cards and notes and letters that arrived from all over the world. Kazzy love, it seemed, had a very long reach.

The Lyons have another camel, a one-humped male Dromedary named Hump-Free, acquired when Kazzy was still healthy, and he will continue Kazzy's work, joined by the 82 other animals, give-or-take, currently at Lyon Ranch. That includes what must be one of the most spectacular private parrot collections in the region, a rescued emu, two alpacas, 14 cats and a miniature donkey that looks a lot like the Eddie Murphy character in the movie *Shrek*.

Pry under the covers of this remarkable facility looking for shadows or dubious motives and you find only sunshine and sincerity.

Robin confesses to an affinity for margaritas and an occasional wild hair, but she and Rob are essentially just what they appear to be—two refreshingly real people who have fallen into an infinitely wonderful dream.

They have learned from their animals how to magnify love and they plan to continue spreading it around. 5



THE GRUMPY GRANDPA

A TRUE STORY

The man who had to be someone's grandpa just sat there with a scowl on his face. No one wanted to go near him. Then the woman with golden hair walked up to him holding a tiny striped kitten.

"Would you like to hold a kitten?" she asked.

"No!" he said. "I hate cats."

"How 'bout a puppy? I have a puppy you might like," said the woman.

"No way," he growled. "I hate dogs."

"OK, then," said the woman. She was very patient. "How 'bout a camel?"

"Camel?" he yelled. "Don't you patronize me young lady."

The woman went out.

In a few minutes a big handsome man came into the room, leading a camel, clop-clopping behind him on a leash.

"Kush, Kазzy," he said to the camel, and the animal knelt down next to the grumpy man's wheelchair.

Then the camel lifted her big head and put it on the man's lap. She closed her big brown eyes with the inch-long eyelashes and soon she was asleep on the man's legs.

The man smiled, something he hadn't done in a long, long time.

It is virtually impossible not to smile with Burt the cockatoo sitting on your shoulder and babbling in your ear.