



# Mending Fences

HOW ONE MARRIED COUPLE STOPPED HAVING A REPEAT FIGHT FOREVER: A BIG JOLT OF GOOD SENSE. **BY TRACY McARDLE**

**B**y the time I had drilled a hole in my left index finger and christened the electric fence with my forehead, I realized I should have let my husband manage the goat-fence project. Having relocated to rural Massachusetts after a decade in New York and Los Angeles, I was determined to evolve from brunch-going urbanite to work-glove-wearing homeowner. If I were to be honest, I would admit I was trying to prove I could help my husband build a fence. But my part of the job – begun when Nat was at work – took longer than I planned, my husband came home, and by the end of the evening the goat wasn't the only one with boundary issues.

We had decided to contain Reba, a Nigerian dwarf goat and companion for my

horse, by adding a strip of electric fencing around the perimeter of the paddock. “We’ll do it together,” I said enthusiastically. “I’ll pick up the materials at Agway after work.” Nat had already delivered the goat, built a gate, and installed the electric-fence charger, so I figured it was only fair that I help with the addition.

It would be a bonding experience, just like those funny montage scenes in romantic comedies. Besides, this is the 21st century. Why should I always do the indoor chores like laundry and invitations, and he the dirty dump runs and tree cutting?

All I had to do was attach plastic yellow fence insulators to each post, slot the tape through, and connect it to the charger. Presto: instant goat con-

trol. On the fifth post I succeeded in stripping my 10th screw. Later, when I finally found the drill I had hurled halfway across the yard, I resumed stringing tape until it seemed I was done. It wasn't exactly level but was good enough, I thought. I stood back to admire my handiwork, and Reba promptly leapt over the tape. This is when the first-class passenger in me wondered why I hadn't just called a real, live handyman and written a check. Then I remembered, I'm sleeping with a handyman – and *he lives here*.

Nat's truck pulled in. I readied an explanation of my pathetic efforts, knowing every screw would be scrutinized. He works in the building trade. That's why we aren't allowed to pay other people to do an-

noying, time-consuming, hazardous things, bonding with my husband notwithstanding.

“This won't work,” I said, already defensive. “She can jump over it.”

“Is the fence on?” he asked cheerfully.

“No!” I barked. (I turned it off after having accidentally sent those 4,000 volts through my head.)

“Honey,” he said. He was using the Careful Tone, and before long we were navigating familiar, perilous terrain. About me insisting every task be a romantic experience in togetherness, and him wanting to simply solve the problem at hand. About him judging my efforts and me being hurt by every little comment.

We had had this argument a million times. But this was different. For one thing, I had shocked myself. And I knew I had spent too much time on a simple task that I didn't necessarily have to do. This is absurd, I thought. Why must I make things harder? I was the

one who suggested we both build the fence. If Nat had done it himself, we would be having dinner right now instead of arguing about how he views my carpentry skills – which, admittedly, are wanting. What did I have to prove, anyway? Was I less of a wife for being inept at goat-fence construction?

Now I try to think first before attempting something I know to be a personal challenge (making souffles, keeping plants alive, doing anything that involves measuring) and take full responsibility for things I am good at. Recently, my horse broke through the electric tape. I made a hasty repair and that night told Nat I didn't think it would hold. A few days later, I came home to find a brand new post-and-rail fence. I thanked him, made dinner, and folded the laundry.

*Tracy McArdle lives in Carlisle. She is the author of Real Women Eat Beef. E-mail comments to [coupling@globe.com](mailto:coupling@globe.com).*

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