



Saving Jenny

by Gwen Gordon

The summer I turned twelve, I played mother to two orphaned baby squirrels. I named these wiggly pink infants Jimmy and Jenny, and every half-hour I fed them warm formula from a bottle and rubbed their tummies until they pooped. Watching them grow into squirrels through my care was one of the most satisfying experiences I'd had.

As soon as Jimmy and Jenny were old enough to make mischief, I kept them in a big cage, letting them out twice a day to play freely in the house. During playtime, their favorite sports included daredevil leaps onto curtain rods, tap dances on the piano, and mad scampers across high beams. When the squirrels were loose, the rule was all doors and windows had to be closed and the toilet lid shut. One day, at the end of playtime, as usual I called Jimmy and Jenny for their feeding. Normally, both squirrels were easy to coax back for lunch. This time, Jimmy was the only one who came running to perch on top of my head and wait for a walnut. I gave him a few sunflower seed appetizers and called again for Jenny. She was nowhere in sight. I called again, and again, and again. Still no Jenny. I checked under beds, inside closets, laundry baskets, then cabinets, dressers, and curtains. I desperately emptied drawers of clothing and turned over furniture. The heat of motherhood rose in my blood.

Finally, having exhausted every other possibility, I tentatively opened the door to the bathroom. "Oh, no!" It was my worst fear! Bobbing in the unflushed toilet bowl was a gasping, soaking Jenny. I held my breath and pulled her out with my bare hands, wiped her off, and wrapped her in a towel, then ran upstairs yelling for help, "Mom, Dad, Dale, Lynn! HELP!" Dale, my oldest sister, was the only one home. I couldn't remember if we were in the middle of a fight or not. I just



blurted out how Jenny had fallen into a bucket of soaking clothes and was drowning when I found her, and couldn't she, Dale, please save her, PLEASE.



Dale had recently been trained as a lifeguard and knew all about first aid for humans. She opened the towel with Jenny's soggy, limp body in it and, without hesitation, covered Jenny's mouth and nose with her mouth and applied mouth-to-squirrel resuscitation. For a few minutes, she tried gently pressing Jenny's belly, then breathing into her, pressing, breathing, pressing, breathing. Gradually the water emptied from Jenny's lungs as Dale's breath filled them. Dale kept breathing and breathing. But after many more rounds, Jenny just lay there, still and breathless. We stared helplessly at her tiny body for what seemed like an eternity. Then Dale and I gravely wrapped her back up in the towel and gave each other a long teary hug.

I don't know if Dale ever suspected that she had applied mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a squirrel who had been soaking in toilet water. I watched her carefully for the next few days to make sure she didn't get sick. She didn't. In fact, we were both a little better tempered after Jenny's death. We didn't fight nearly as much over who got the bigger serving of dessert or which TV show we were going to watch, and occasionally we even went out of our ways to offer each other a kind word or help with chores. Years later, when I told Dale the truth about the toilet water, she just laughed. It made absolutely no difference to her, she says. She would do it again in a second, maybe after drying Jenny off a little more.

Even though we didn't have the words for it at the time, I think we both felt the supreme honor it was to serve another life so intimately. And, at twelve and sixteen years old, we welcomed the ripening of compassion that was stirred by a helpless squirrel but flowed easily toward each other and eventually, with every year's ripening, a little more toward the rest of the world.

