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# Lifesaving

*Help when it's needed.*  
*By Millie Baker Ragosta*



I am an inveterate salvager. When I married in 1950, I learned that a person could buy for next to nothing century-old furniture that would last another century or so. (To be sure, I often had to strip layer upon layer of paint to find the maple, walnut, cherry, or oak underneath.) As our family grew to include eleven children, salvaging became a way of life for me. The furniture foolish folks discarded—and which I restored—provided each child leaving home with several fine old pieces.

When we were down to four children still living with us, we sold our 12-room, 4-bathroom Victorian house in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, and bought a one-story, 1800-square-foot house a block away, a house that had been built from salvage. By the time my husband, Vince, and I bought it in 1983, nearly a half-century after its creation, it was in need of restoration, which we began immediately.

When Vince died in 1990, so was I.

Local contractor Jim Grieb helped with the house's restoration. My kids and grandkids helped with mine. They collectively enfolded me—as if I were freezing—in the warm blanket that was their love, even though each one of them was heartbroken, too. A day seldom passed that winter of our bereavement without one or the other of them telephoning from their homes, as far away as California, to grieve with me, and to laugh, too, over the things we remembered about their beloved dad and granddad.

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY P. SAVAGE



I also continued the restoration of the house. Vince and I had already insulated the attic. We'd remodeled both bathrooms and removed a hideous plywood island in the kitchen as well as replacing most of the wiring and plumbing. Now I removed shabby wall-to-wall carpet from the oak floors and gutted the rest of the kitchen, removing 50's plywood cabinets and having Amish builders make me solid maple cabinets.

As Spring approached, I took on the back garden, which I thought of as my personal Matterhorn, since it rose in a series of steep terraced hills. Mowing the grass on those banks was an exercise in terror. The only solution I could think of was groundcover. I began scrounging whole garbage bags full of English ivy and periwinkle from friends with established gardens. Eventually, I replaced every last blade of grass with groundcover plants. I

now possess a year-round green mountain, dotted, each spring, with every type of daffodil I could find.



Recently, my contractor/handyman/friend Jim, who has patiently helped me with each new project, was staining the pickets for a new fence. I opened the back door to ask if he'd like an iced tea—and was shocked to see that a death-in-the-afternoon drama was about to occur! A chipmunk was swimming back and forth across my garden's deep birdbath, trying futilely to climb out its sleek sides.

I let out a banshee yell and jumped down from the porch to rescue the exhausted little chipmunk, startling Jim, who dropped his paintbrush and turned to see what was wrong. But what should I do? I didn't want to grab the poor critter. It might frighten him into heart failure—or into biting me. Finally, knowing the chipmunk would die if I didn't do something, I heaved the tub over, and the nearly drowned little animal fell out on the ground.

Jim looked at the wet chipmunk. "How do you suppose he got in there?" he said.

"No idea," I replied. "Maybe he was running around the edge and slipped in."

"I bet he won't try that again."

We could see that the chipmunk's heart was beating furiously. Since there seemed nothing more we could do for the adventurous little fellow, Jim went back to staining the fence and I to the house to get him iced tea.

When I returned, the chipmunk was nowhere in sight.

"Where did he go?" I asked.

Jim said, "He looked so cold I thought I'd set him over in the sun to warm up. I tried to slide the garden spade under him, but he keeled over like he'd had a heart attack. Then he jumped up and ran into the groundcover down at the end of the garden. You saved his life, Millie."

I've thought of that tiny daredevil often since then and how I fulfilled the role of guardian angel to a creature in a situation he couldn't handle without help.

It happens to all of us from time to time. ❖