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she falls, cheers her up when she appears sad and keeps her company at night. Katelyn has hugged and kissed Katie so many times that her stuffing is a bit lumpy and her nose is worn almost off.

My younger daughter, Kelsey, joins in the imaginary play, using a high-pitched squeaky voice to make Katie "talk" to Katelyn. And when Katelyn is the one feeling hurt, sad or lonely, Kelsey rushes to bring Katie to Katelyn to comfort her. "I always knew Katie seemed real, almost like a member of our family, but I never knew how real until last weekend when Katie suddenly became endangered, so to speak.

Katelyn had spent the night at a friend's house and I had come to pick her up. Loaded down with her sleeping bag, pillow, duffel bag and Katie, I helped Katelyn into the van and was loading her stuff in when I dropped Katie and a big puff of wind blew her beneath the van.

Katelyn and Kelsey started crying hysterically. "Get her, Mom. Get her," Katelyn screamed.

I quickly dropped the rest of the gear, got down on my hands and knees and saw that Katie had stopped rolling smack under the middle of the undercarriage — somewhere near the catalytic converter. I tried to grab her, but she was too far underneath for me to comfortably reach her.

I had two choices. I could get into the van and luck it up a few feet, put the van in park and run out and grab Katie before she blew farther away. Or, I could lay on the snowy ground and slide on my belly underneath the van until I could reach her.

While I wanted to do the former, I opted for the latter. The girls were crying so hysterically that I

was afraid the thought of Katie blowing under a tire as I backed the van up would send them flying out of the van and underneath it in an effort to rescue her.

I lay on the snowy ground and squeezed under the van, trying not to get my coat too dirty. Finally, I reached one of Katie's paws and yanked her out.

I dusted the snow and dirt off Katie, put her into Katelyn's arms, got into the car and started driving home. Both girls continued to sob, probably out of relief.

I could understand Katelyn's tears, but Kelsey's baffled me. Finally, I asked, "Kelsey why are you crying?"

"Because," she said between sobs, "I'm her aunt."

A few minutes later, Katelyn asked, "Do you think she's feverish, Mom? She's shivering."

"I don't think so," I said. "She's probably just cold." Then, without even thinking about how ridiculous my gesture was, I took off my jacket and gave it to Katelyn to wrap Katie in until she warmed up.

As I continued down the road, it occurred to me that I, too, thought of Katie as almost real at times. Without realizing it, I often joined the girls in their imaginary play world, "talking" for Katie and treating her as though she were a living bear.

But then a thought struck me that jolted me back to reality: If Kelsey is Katie's aunt, that must make me her grandmother!

Karen Hermes Smith is editor of *The Clarkson Eccentric* and former instructor at Oakland University.

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