

They May Not Be Forever, But Rats are a Girl's Best Friend

by Jacquie Phelan



When I was little, and our suburban LA home had an entire ½ acre in the back yard, we had every imaginable (as well as the occasional unimaginable) pet we could beg, wheedle, and trick my parents into allowing us kids to keep.

We went through a "goat phase," suffered a tyranny of raccoons, sneaked through a couple of rattlesnakes, and once even rescued a crow from its cap-sized nest. We need not mention the countless tadpoles, frogs, rabbits and mice proliferating freely in our zoological shantytown.

All these were survived by our grubby but loveable matted monster of a black poodle, who bore the grand French name of "Solange." Solange took a dim view of the smaller pets, especially the lower vertebrates, and suffered patiently as we lived out our Gerald Durrell fantasies.

In recent years, having settled down in a nice house with my long-time sweetheart, I've felt the urge to enrich my life with another life: to take on a new responsibility, and yet somehow stave off the inevitable grown-upness associated with turning thirty.

It was time to find a pet. An unusual pet.

For reasons of space, a dog wouldn't

cut it, and the take-it-or-leave-it attitude of most cats left me cold. A snake would leave anyone cold. Mice are too neurotic and smell a bit musky for my taste.

No, it had to be a rat. I remembered once having started a riot in geography class, by allowing "Snoopy" to peek out of my jacket sleeve as I turned in a report on Uruguay. I remembered the whiffling noise, and the bugged-out eyes, and the rat mannerisms like the Ear-Clean and painstakingly thorough pedicure.

I don't want to wax too . . . uh . . . eloquent on the subject, but I gotta hand it to 'em: These furry bundles of joy pack quite an emotional whallop. I mean, for the size, where else can you find old Fido's willingness to please, Mitten's finicky cleanlines, Woody Allen's endearingly paranoid intelligence and the space requirements of the average round loaf of Bordenave's sourdough?

They're easy to feed: One of the reasons they are so often chosen in dietary experiments is that rats, like humans, consider potato chips to be food. Just give them runt-sized portions of your leftovers, and a little commercial Rat Mix, and they'll love you for it.

On the negative side, they have unsightly yellow teeth and only half the shelf life of a can of tuna.

Since rats have a charming way of gnawing their way into your heart, you may find that, along with the easy chair and the stereo cover, they've left a big hole in your life when they finally "Bite The Big One."

A couple of things you should know about before you rush out and buy one of these great deals of the domestic animal kingdom: 1) Don't ever forget to keep yours fed and the water bottle full. 2) Don't play hacky-sack with your rat. In terms of durability, it's tough to top

the rat. Pestilence, famine, and radiation can be adapted to, but under no circumstance should you test this out.

Another tip you won't find in the "How-To" rat books is the fact that a discreet (you don't want to gross your mom out) gob of spit at the end of your finger is the rat's favorite kind of "bubbly." Careful application of this knowledge will result in a rat that can come when summoned, will sit up and look like a polar bear (in dogs this is called "begging." Rats NEVER beg!), and do countless other tricks too numerous to mention. The sky's the limit with your rat.

The "How-To" books will enlighten you about shavings versus screen-bottom cages. I prefer to deal here with the fun stuff, like how I look forward to seeing Chrome Molly and little Demo doing chin ups on the plastic rim of the aquarium the minute I arrive home from work. For some reason, they still haven't figured out how to climb down the other side, and escape into the sofa cushions, but I didn't say *all* rats were intelligent, did I?

Well, if I did, then I meant they're intelligent in different *ways*. Mine are artistically oriented: cage rearranging and fabric unravelling . . . right-brained activities. If you have an engineer rat on your hands, you'll know it when you find the door of the cage jimmed open and the overturned food dish used as a ladder.

If one of *my* babies did that, I'd refuse to let them read with me, deny 'em the daily ride into town on my shoulder, and perhaps withhold spit privileges for a week. Physical discipline is unnecessary, and counterproductive. A well-placed kick could launch your pet into the ivy and deprive you of three years worth of loyalty and affection. ●●