DRAFT BOOK

THE OTHER SUBURBANITES

THE POSSUM BOOK

Robyn Tracey

Dedication

To all the people who tried to help me find Snoopy, and to people everywhere who live in peace with the parallel worlds of other species.

Preface (INCOMPLETE)

This is essentially a story about Snoopy, a bushy-tail possum who, because of an early physical disability, had to live in two worlds, human and possum. But Snoopy's predicament can be appreciated only in the context of possums as a whole, and in the context of her own history and personality. Her story was played out in possum terms, and in order to understand what is going on you have to know what possum terms are. As I found when I was looking for her when she was lost, most people do not know what they are, so the book had to `grow' to explain about possums before the action could begin, essentially by a series of answers to the questions people asked me - Where do possums go in the daytime? Why do they fight so much? Why are they so often killed on the roads? How do they get on with dogs and cats? And so on.

This is not intended as an academic textbook. I have research qualifications in another subject area, but none whatsoever in zoology or ethology or any of the other appropriate disciplines. It was commenced, and the bulk of it originally written, in 1975, while I under great stress, looking for a lost animal, and written for the most part from memory, not from my notes. It is, however, reasonably accurate: when I checked back with my notes, inaccuracies were of the order of saying that Sherry popped a piece of bread, instead of a piece of carrot, into her baby's mouth; quite a deal of the final section was written, literally, as it happened before my eyes, generally on my window sill, occasionally on the typewriter itself.

I have been told that some of my observations are, coincidentally, of academic value, since the particular behaviour concerned has not been observed before. For this reason I have endeavoured to make some reasonable gestures towards academic standards, and indicate how I know what I know. As indicated in Part I, the books available to me at the time for the most part either did not deal with the questions to which I wanted answers, or manifestly did not apply to the particular possums with which I was dealing. Since I cannot cite books, I have had to cite possums, `case studies', for the most part in the notes; since the book is aimed primarily at the general reader, these have been given in the form of anecdotes, rather than scientific observations. I hope that my academic colleagues will forgive this, and be able to cut through the literary trappings to the data; I have copious notes down to the time of Snoopy's first disappearance, more sporadic notes thereafter, and a fairly complete genealogical record of the Newport and Ingleside possums over a period of approximately twelve years, with a more desultory record thereafter, and I would be delighted to make this available to anyone with a serious interest, and, to the best of my ability, answer any questions that I can.

Possums seem to think in very clearcut, simple terms, in extremes, in black and white with few shades of grey, in capital letters, as it were. Things are either absolutely wonderful or totally appalling, galvanizingly interesting or boring to the point of rigidity, and so on. For this reason I have capitalised possum concepts in the text - along with a few human concepts which seem to me to be equally simplistic.

Some books available in public libraries at the time were of use, among them principally the non-academic book by Paule Ridpath, *Possum Moods* (Sydney, Ure Smith 1967), *Edwards (???), Basil Marlow, *Marsupials of Australia* (Brisbane, The Jacaranda Press, no date), Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring* (London, Pan, 1957) and *On Aggression* (London, Methuen, 1966) and, at a later date at Ingleside, Jane van Lawick-Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man* (London, Collins, 1971). I would also like to thank, in particular, Malcolm Smith, then of Macquarie University, who read a large proportion of the book in 1976, and gave me invaluable scientific advice.

I should, however point out that any academic delinquencies included are mine, not his, since I have on occasion ignored his advice. The book is, in the last analysis, a record of my experiences, and so must comprise my observations at the time, however flawed they may have been. I would also like to thank all the long-suffering vets who have helped me with the possums over the years, especially Bob Bradley, and all the other people who have encouraged and chivvied me to keep going and finish the book.

To anticipate some `slings and arrows' already aimed at my head, I am not writing this book to make money for myself. A great deal of my information was obtained when I was canvassing the district, pestering people; I told them that I was looking for a lost animal, not collecting information for a book, and so, while many in fact said, `You should write a book,' it would be improper to do so. I shall not be taking any money from this book, beyond a nominal amount for immediate expenses such as stationary. Any profits it may happen to generate will be directed to a trust fund to preserve the Newport property as a sanctuary for the native wildlife, including, of course, the descendants of Jenny, Foxy, Mrs. Poss and the other characters in the story.

Cover photo: ‘Miri’ at Newport, 22-26 August, 1977

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PART I
PROLOGUE: JOEY AND THE NEWPORT POSSUMS.

1. The Baby on the Doorstep.

The whole thing really began with Joey, a baby bushy-tail possum who was left on my doorstep in spring 1969. The old dog, a very good-natured fellow who had to be taught to kill bush rats when they reached plague proportions, proclaimed loudly that he had one cornered between two pot-plants, and wanted someone to move them so he could get at it.

I was reluctant to comply. The rats by this time had been reduced to a handful that did no harm, and while I have no love for them, I have no special animus against them, either. But the dog insisted, and kept insisting, for more than half an hour, so I finally went out and moved one of the pots - and hauled the dog off by the collar, yelling for assistance.

Instead of a rat, there was four inches of baby possum, hissing and swearing its defiance, its arms upraised to strike, its non-existent teeth bared to bite the attacker.

Joey accepted warm milk,[ia] and was made comfortable in a warm cloth. We knew virtually nothing about possums, except that they were nocturnal, and should be in warm dark enclosed places during the day. This in fact proved to be true, and all his physical requirements had indeed been met, but nevertheless it became quite evident after a couple of hours that he was dying.

I moved him on to my bed, still wrapped in his cloth, but leaning against me so that I could keep a better watch on his condition, and in about an hour he was a perfectly well and extremely contented baby possum.

Afterwards, I remembered a very young white mouse I once had as a pet; someone told me that if I wanted him to survive I had to put him inside my jumper, where he could feel the presence of another live animal. Joey had lost his mother, and he was going to die, but now he'd found her again, so everything was all right. Mother was defined as a large warm animal - and, although I didn't know it then, hairless from the point of view of a young baby, since the inside of the pouch is unfurred - which protected him, fed him, and against whom he curled up to sleep.

I had also learnt another basic lesson about possums; while they can get over and compensate for almost any physical disability which does not interfere with their behaviour patterns, emotional factors can kill even a strong healthy possum.

Having been appointed mother to a possum I had to set about finding out what this entailed. This proved something of a problem. The books available at the time were demonstrably inaccurate, as observation of the local possums showed.

One was doing fine, until it said, `but they always have twins.' I think this statement may have arisen from a confusion with ring-tail possums, which are not, in fact, very closely related to bushy-tail possums (*trichosurus vulpecula vulpecula*, `Hairy one, little fox, little fox'); the behaviour patterns of the two species indeed appear to differ markedly. I have never known a case of multiple birth in *trichosurus vulpecula vulpecula*. I've probably seen a couple of hundred mother-and-baby situations, but all in the northern Sydney area, so I'm in no position to say that it never happens elsewhere. But in this district, one is the norm.

I have seen apparent cases of `twins', but all were by adoption,

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a. Cow's milk. This is most inadvisable with other native animals, including ring-tail possums; soy milk is safer.

and all obviously far from ideal arrangements, which suggests that this is not what comes naturally.[ii]

Another of the textbooks available at that time produced one of the half-truths that seem to bedevil the literature, `constant exposure to bright light will kill them'. Undoubtedly this is often true in effect, and doubtless in most cases the inaccuracy is of academic interest only, and makes no difference to the wretched possums. But in others, that fine distinction is of vital importance to the animal.

To a possum, bright light means daytime. A possum in the open in the daytime is a possum in trouble - unable to see, unprotected and confused by strange noises, it knows it is at the mercy of predators. While bushy-tail possums spend quite a deal of time on the ground, there is always an element of danger attached to this: they can move like a flash over a short distance, but over more than about ten or fifteen feet they are no match for a dog. They consequently avoid open ground whenever possible. A possum exposed on open ground in the daytime is a dead possum, and it knows it. If you take a normal, conscious possum, place it in an exposed, lighted position, and make it impossible for it to get away to darkness and safety, no doubt it will die - of terror.

Low light, voluntarily entered under circumstances which allow them to retreat at their own discretion, is a different matter. Even before Joey's appearance there had occasionally been possums making themselves conspicuous in the half-light or peering in at the windows at night. It was only in retrospect that we realised what that was all about - possums don't have to make themselves visible unless they want to. These possums were in the habit of getting handouts from neighbouring houses, so they were exploring the possibility of training other humans, closer to home and so more convenient. But once we started to watch them it became evident that possums who are accustomed to coming into lighted rooms can do so without too much distress, and without apparent detriment to their nightsight.

None can see well in such light - it seems to be roughly equivalent to the case of a human in semi-darkness. Some practised possums can contract their pupils to a pinhead to cope with the extra light, just as your own nightsight, being a matter of muscular co-ordination, can improve with practice. Others never master the trick. In any case vision is limited, sufficient for certain activities with known objects, but not for the full range of normal activity, or to cope with the unexpected. The analogy is not exact, however, since with possums sight is in any event less important than the sense of smell - I have known nearly blind possums to continue to function quite competently in their own known surroundings -- and, provided they are in a known safe place that smells familiar, most find light tolerable.

As with all things possum, it is a matter of degree - and lack of compulsion. No normally sighted possum is actually comfortable in light stronger than bright moonlight, and all prefer darkness. Even those raised in the house, Joey, Snoopy, Kylie, who would of their own accord get up in the middle of the day and stroll across the room for a snack, still preferred the darkest corner of a room lit only by a 40 watt reading lamp when they wanted the company of their human `mother' at night.

And the light has to be steady light. The muscular adjustment involved in changing the size of the pupil takes time. Above all, sudden surges of light, such as a flash bulb, a bright torch or car headlights, not only totally blind, frighten and completely disorientate an animal with eyes adjusted to low level light, but actually hurt, as I can testify from my own personal experience.

Baby possums are especially sensitive to bright or sudden light.

Their eyes are particularly sensitive even to low light, since they have not yet developed the muscular co-ordination needed to adjust their pupils, rapidly or otherwise. I have no doubt at all that constantly exposing a baby to bright or even moderately bright light, or even brief exposure to blinding light such as a flash bulb, could do serious and probably permanent damage, and at the very least terrify the baby to a degree which itself could be harmful.

Again, as with all things possum, it depends to a great extent on the individual animal and the particular circumstances. On the other end of the spectrum, I have known two nearly blind possums, their eyes almost covered by cataracts, switch from nocturnal to diurnal, apparently because the daylight allowed the remaining surface of their pupils to collect sufficient light to see, dimly, whereas they were totally blind at night.

The book's pronouncement is a good general guide in the absence of other information, on the principle of safety first, but the reality is more complex, so in practice there is more latitude.

Not all books are by any means as fatuous, and some which have been published since are a considerable improvement. At a later stage in Joey's development I found a non-academic book, Paule Ridpath's *Possum Moods,*[b] which contained far more pertinent information. But at the time, even in my ignorance, a deal of what was in those which were available did not seem to me to correspond to the observed facts; where it did, the information was brief, and sounded like the sort of knowledge derived from pathology, or isolated laboratory specimens. While I've no doubt that the information provided was accurate, it was very much alive, free possums that I had to deal with.

I got more assistance from the popular ethology books such as Konrad Lorenz' *King Solomon's Ring* and especially *On Aggression*. A great deal of what is written there does apply. Possums show a lot of the same behaviour patterns - the same `parliament of instincts', the same territoriality, the same `critical distance' syndrome, the same ritualization of behaviour, the same sort of aggression and fear reflexes, the same use of ritualized aggression gestures as gestures of affection.

However, they seldom, if ever, show them in precisely the same form as any species discussed there. And they do not have exactly the same combination of behaviour patterns, possessing some, but not others, and substituting idiosyncratic ones of their own. Female dominance, for example, is rare. It happens in possums for good and highly specific reasons pertaining almost exclusively to bushy-tails. I'm told it is found in other species, e.g. the dwarf mongoose - presumably for equally good and highly specific reasons. One wouldn't expect an exact coincidence with any other species - after all, the peculiar and unduplicated combination, and the peculiar forms, are what, behaviourally, makes a species.

Since there was a limit to what I could learn from books, I had to learn from possums, by trial and error.

I did have some idea that Joey should learn to climb trees, and that he should ride on his mother's back, so I put him on my shoulder and took him for short walks each night. I introduced him to small trees, and, partially by putting him on them, but mostly by letting him go of his own accord, got him to start the possum equivalent of toddling.

On about the fourth night a young adult possum came to the window of my room as I was feeding him on bread and milk and grapes. I didn't know what to do, not knowing whether it was his mother or not, or

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b. See Preface for the publication details of this and other works mentioned.

whether its intentions were maternal, amorous or murderous.

Finally I decided to risk letting it in, in the hope that it was indeed his mother come to collect him. I opened the flyscreen very carefully, and offered him to the stranger, keeping my hand partially between them in case of sudden attack.

The baby said, `Eek, a monster!' and shot up the opposite wall of the room. The intruder said, `Eek, Another Possum!' and took off into the night.

She came back a few nights later, and this time her intentions were quite clear. Having seen her baby (as he very probably was) safe and being regaled with food she only dreamt about, she decided she wanted some of the same for herself. She had no real interest whatsoever in the baby itself.

I labelled her Jenny, and when I came to know the local individuals it became fairly certain that she was indeed the defaulting mother. She was at the stage where she should have had her first baby - about a year old - and even among a group with a strong family resemblance, the similarity was unmistakable. Joey was always a miniature Jenny.

About the same time our nightly walks were interrupted by the sudden simultaneous appearance of what seemed like hundreds of possums, all around us - literally dripping from the trees, hanging by their tails and reaching out to grab my hair, coming along the ground to me, holding on to my legs, quite gently, with their front paws, embracing them and trying to climb up.

I was terrified, and so was the baby. I thought they either wanted to kill him or wanted him back. I had already found out that Joey went berserk in the presence of bread, and I'd brought some with me to lure him back down the tree if need be - quite unnecessary, in fact, since by now his `instinct' to return to his mother was directed towards me - so I tried to bribe them with it, distract them while I got away.

This, in fact, was all they wanted. They had no real interest in the baby for its own sake, but his presence on my shoulder marked me as a person who was accustomed to possums, and so trained to produce food on demand. Unbeknownst to us, the neighbours had been giving them handouts for years, and they were only too delighted to add another house to their nightly stops. As there was more bush on our place, where they would normally browse in any case, eventually those who lived nearest made it their regular headquarters, and it was from them that I learnt the rules and regulations I needed to know to raise a baby possum.

2. `There are Hairies at the Bottom of My Garden...'

I learnt very gradually, a little at a time, by experience. I usually learnt after the event, when the consequences showed whether I had guessed rightly or wrongly. I learnt a little, at first, from the local possums, and far more from Joey himself. After he disappeared, I learnt far more still from the possums I met at that stage. And I learnt even more from Snoopy and her Ingleside descendants and neighbours. I have no delusions that this makes me the world's greatest expert on possums: the most important thing I learnt was that since all possums are individuals, no one `knows all about possums'. It merely makes me the reigning expert on these particular possums - since I'm the only one.

There isn't time or space right now to do anything but summarise what I know in a series of dogmatic statements, and there isn't time or space for much in the way of examples or case histories. Some will come out

in the story, a few have been appended in the notes, and I can supply others if anyone wants them.

Possums are essentially intelligent but pragmatic animals, which never exert themselves in any way, including demonstrating their intelligence, without a reason. There are very strongly marked behaviour patterns, which show up even in the play-patterns of isolated infants, and so are innate. These behaviour patterns make eminent good sense under the conditions which generally apply to their lives, but I've known every one of them broken by an individual intelligent possum when those conditions cease to apply.

There is no such thing as `always', no such word as `never'. The generalities drawn here are of an order of truth somewhere between `all humans live in houses' and `all human females stay at home to look after the house, and all human males go out to find the food.'

Antipathy towards other possums

The most basic of all is that all possums hate all other possums. The greatest anathema to a possum is Another Possum. There is a certain distance (`critical ', or more properly, `personal' distance), and any possum which comes within that distance must be attacked. Critical distance varies from possum to possum and place to place. In built-up areas, where circumstances have forced more possums into a smaller space than in more bushy ones, critical distance can drop to almost nothing, but physical contact between two adult possums always involves some degree of agitation: fear or aggression on one or both sides. And a retreating rump is an unfailing aggression stimulus - it must be bitten until it is out of range. The only exception is the relationship between mother and baby, and that could not be more different.

Behaviour towards strange babies

Strange youngsters receive a milder version of the treatment handed out to strange adults. A baby which approaches the wrong female will be chased away- scolded, spanked with closed teeth, or occasionally nipped, depending on the character of the adult female. Males are generally fairly tolerant, but more prone to do real damage when they do attack. The baby's own mother will intervene if matters become too serious, particularly if the attacker is a male.

towards hand-reared babies

A hand-reared baby who has maintained contact with the local group, i.e. is known to them as an individual by scent and sight, is treated by members of that group in exactly the same way as any other youngster of the same age, physical capacity and gender.

It is disadvantaged insofar as its mother is grounded, and can't interfere if the problem is twenty feet up a tree. It is therefore in much the same situation as the baby of a weak mother: if the baby is sensible, and physically agile enough to get away and come down to you, or at a later stage disappear into the bush for a couple of hours and return to its frantic foster parent only after the others have departed for the night, it grows up to be possum. It will almost certainly develop some eccentricities and idiosyncrasies, stemming from the peculiar environment in which it was raised, but the same is true of babies raised by their own mothers: unless its peculiarities are potentially dangerous in a `wild' situation, or its basic behaviour patterns have been too badly distorted, it is still a viable possum. Alternatively, if the baby is physically disabled, but has the sense to stay within range of its `mother', it will still survive.

The baby, in order to learn what it has to know, must see other possums in action on occasions, and later, when it's three or four months old, it's got to learn by hard experience. But the worst thing you can do is to put a young baby into a conflict situation by placing it in physical contact with other possums. This is not at all what I mean by `maintaining

contact with the group'. What you do by `instinct' is pretty much what its own mother would have done - keep it out of trouble, keep it out of the way of the others wherever possible, protect it to the utmost of your ability.

Close physical proximity to other possums is rare in any case. After the frenetic activity of the nightly handout is over, the possums go their own separate ways, and except in the mating season the feed group activity occupies only a small percentage of the nightly routine. Weak mothers come, if they can, after the main group has departed, or at least wait until the others are fully occupied with their meals, to avoid conflict. If the situation gets too difficult, they stay away while the baby is tiny, just as you yourself would keep it inside for a while if things became too hairy.

For the baby to be known as an individual, and as a familiar local possum, it is not required that it should be thrust into the turmoil of the group activity. A youngster playing in a tree is as obvious to other possums as it could possibly be. The possum that you don't know is in a tree a hundred feet away knows you both very well, by sight and smell, as individuals. If it's interested, it can follow every move you both make. On the whole, it isn't very interested in the baby - that's just one of a number, more than it knows how to count, of local individual youngsters. It's generally more interested in you.

Territoriality

All possums are territorial, but adult females are far more so than males, and for good reason.

Safe, comfortable nests where babies can be raised are much rarer than `bachelor flats'. Once a female finds such a nest, generally speaking she will stay there for the rest of her life, unless forced to move: by being evicted by a stronger possum or humans; by the tree, shed, what-have-you falling down or starting to leak; by the disappearance of the food supply. Alternatively, the appearance of a new and better food supply (say, humans newly trained by possums to provide food on demand) may induce her to change her nest if there is a suitable one nearer to it vacant, or occupied by a weaker possum. But on the whole, once there, she stays there, rather than risk losing what she has.

She holds a territory around the nest, varying in size according to the circumstances - a few acres in the bush, depending on food supply, the presence of other possums, etc., but usually not much more than a normal night's journey for her. Some places are more especially hers than others, and there is a core territory in the immediate vicinity of the nest, but it isn't necessarily laid out by human geometry. The presence of Other Possums is tolerated less and less the closer (in terms of possum travel)they come to the nest; further away, except in places especially favoured by the proprietor, Other Possums may come and go in what are more or less common areas, though the ownership is still there in theory, and recognised when Madam chooses to assert herself.

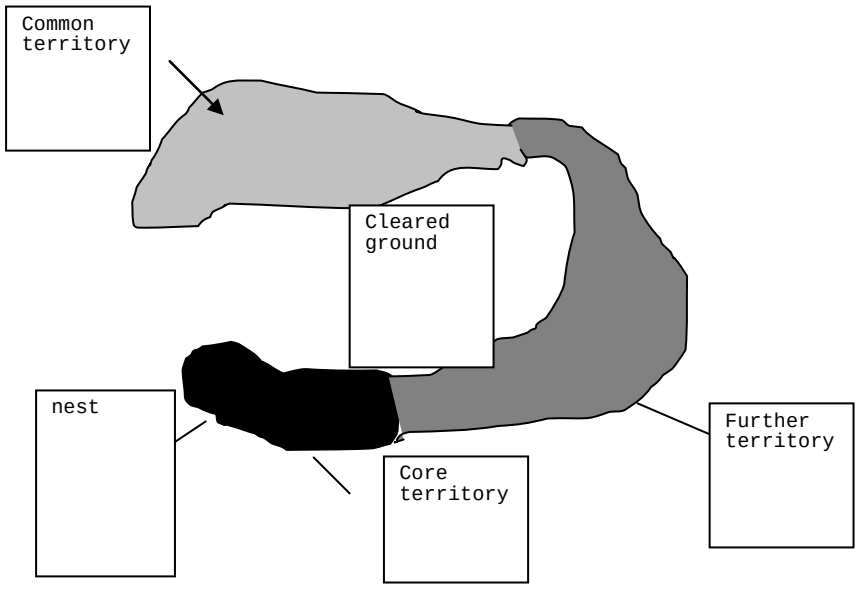

Fig. 1 a. Hypothetical territory based roughly on Bindi's, illustrating possum rather than human geometry. Common ground is closer to the nest by direct distance than the extreme part of the further territory, but at the furthest extremity of the possum's route.

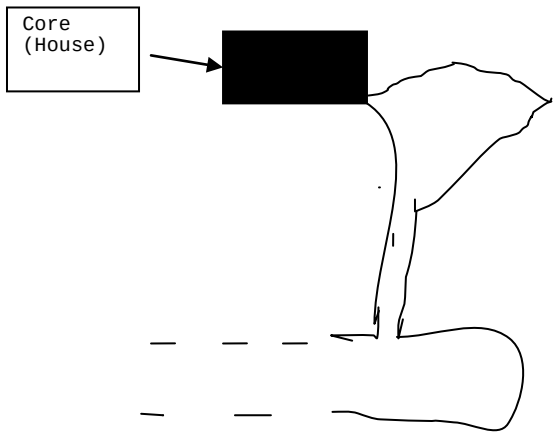

Fig. 1 b. Snoopy's first territory.

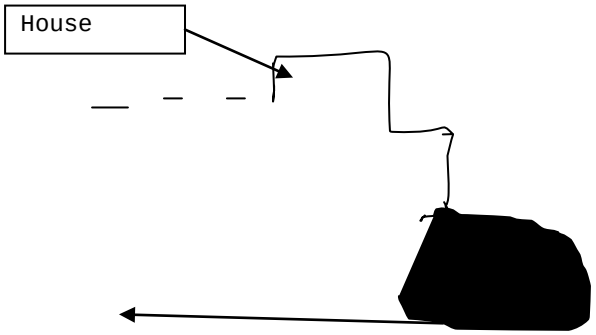

Fig. 1 c. Kylie’s territory.

N.b. there is a third-dimensional element, which cannot be shown in a two-dimensional sketch; Kylie, for example, also owned the roof of the house at one stage, while Snoopy owned the interior.

Safe established routes within the territory are marked by scent trails, some common to a number of possums, others the trails of particular individuals who alone have business going a certain way to certain places. Trails are marked by excreting fluid from a gland in the rear, and also by a gland in the chest, which is rubbed on the object in question (hence the brown stripe down the chest). The latter method is used especially to mark actual possessions, say the particular tree where the nest is located.[iii] Possums tend to keep to these `railway lines' once they have been laid, since to diverge means risking uncharted dangers. For all these reasons, a female possum will, if forced to change her nest, choose another within her own territory if she can. If physically removed from her territory, she will make every effort to come back. If more than one nest is available close by, she will sometimes sleep in others - probably because in bush conditions a nest which is rainproof from one wind direction is drenched from another. If she can afford it, she sometimes has a secondary main nest somewhere else in her territory, as well appointed as the first, near another desirable food source, and spends lengthy periods there. During the process of separation between mother and baby, it is fairly common to find the mother in one nest and the adolescent occupying another nearby. But there always seems to be one main nest, and that is the core of her emotional life.

Babies are born, and grow up, and become Other Possums, and, if female, sometimes eventually tolerated neighbours. If she loses a baby she looks for it, and grieves for it, too, but she soon has another one, which grows up and leaves in its turn. Some mothers still recognise juvenile daughters for a short period after they mature: others don't, and probably, from their own point of view, have only one baby, The Baby, who sometimes gets lost, but shows up again in their pouches some months later - and they are careful not to lose it again. Their affection for the baby is completely overriding as long as it is a baby, and their devotion total - I have seen mothers risk their lives to save their babies, drawing the attention of would-be predators on themselves. But babies come and go, and their memory for individuals is in any case short. Their memory for places is much longer, and the nest remains theirs `forever'.

Male The males, too, are territorial, but, in the suburbs at least,

territoriality less ferociously so. The normal male territory in bushier areas covers about three female territories, and so many night's journey, and he perambulates from one end to the other.

A male can camp almost anywhere, unlike a breeding female, though naturally he prefers better accommodation when he can get it, and usually there seems to be one main nest, in the territory of the female he can best beguile into tolerating his presence.

For preference, this is the largest, and fiercest, who therefore occupies the choicest territory nearest the best food. Consequently, you get a kind of very loose marriage - it is very much an arrangement of convenience. The male is in no way `faithful' to the female - his amorous attentions are, if anything, more likely to be directed towards smaller and weaker females who mete out less severe punishment - nor does she show any marked desire for his company. However, it is likely that an incoming resident male has mated with the dominant on his first arrival: it is at this time, when `critical distance' is broken down by the courtship ritual, that the newcomer has the best chance of installing himself. If he takes that opportunity, he can accustom her to his continued presence, and her `critical distance', for him, remains slightly less than it is for possums in general.

Because of this, and because his nest is near hers, the male tends to arrive at a house feed group in attendance upon the particular female near whom he resides. Once there, he pays no more attention to her than to any of the others, nor she to him. I do know of one instance, however, of an intelligent male exploiting the `critical distance' differential in the feed group situation.

Joe - there is some reason to think he was Joey grown up - was the current resident male at our house, and consequently Jenny's attendant. At one stage he suffered a fairly severe injury to his tail, and was being harassed by the other possums, particularly the males. Probably through trial and error at first, he developed the habit of taking his food and sitting near Jenny - at a respectful distance, beyond `critical distance' for him, but within her `critical distance' for possums in general. He was, therefore, in a kind of penumbra, protected by Jenny's invisible aegis.

Jenny may or may not in some way have accepted her protective role - at that stage she was somewhat confused as to which baby wasn't hers[c] - and Joe could, after a time, approach her and steal some of her food, baby-fashion, with impunity.

While a particular male will make his main residence in the territory of a particular female, and regularly appears in her company, he also absents himself for a night, or several nights, quite frequently, presumably inspecting the further reaches of his territory. Other males living in adjacent female territories come to be fed at the same house, and in more built-up areas the male territories actually seem to overlap.[iv]
Squabbles between males are frequent and noisy - the larger, stronger male, or alternatively the most intelligent, will hold the prime territory and seek to protect his privileges, while adjacent males from time to time covert them. But, while their battles are sometimes serious and bloody, they are not, on the whole, as serious as fights between females, again at least in the suburbs.

For given the circumstances, males quite simply cannot afford to be as intensely territorial as females.

The females generally occupy the area a possum would cover in a

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c See below, pp.* 295 f.

night's journey.[d] Males are promiscuous in the extreme, and so in order to have access to enough females, a male must at least establish his presence in the territory of several females, so ranging across a wider area, about as many nights' journey in length as there are female territories included.

There is simply no way he can police all his territory effectively: while he's down one end there is no way he can stop another male being down the other. There is no way he can fail to know about it, too, on his return: all possums leave scent trails, and of the two methods described, the scent left by the chest gland is more durable - in two separate cases I have known it to last up to six months; males, travelling further, need to take particular care about leaving a trail that they can follow back, and particular care that the traces they leave will last long enough to serve them on their return, and so chest-mark even more frequently than females. When a male returns to one extremity of his territory, his nose will tell him there has been an intruder. If he stays put for a while to protect that part of his territory, he's likely to find that the same thing has happened down the other end when he finally goes back. What's a bloke to do?

The difference in size between male and female territories means that he cannot afford to feel as possessive about his as she does about hers, and his emotional ties with his territory are consequently not as strong.

As a corollary to this, males change their territories quite frequently, usually in the mating season. Younger males generally seem to do so more often, becoming more settled as they grow older; the rare old males, like Erik at Ingleside and Old Pink Pig at Newport, may eventually find a permanent residence.

Changeovers are usually marked by fights, but I have known a couple of fairly amicable ones in the built-up areas - after all, there are plenty more females and food-stops and sleeping places just down the road, so if the other fellow really wants this particular place it's easier to let him have it. In less built-up areas such as Ingleside, where there is a wider discrepancy between the haves and the have-nots in terms of handouts, the competition seems more genuine and fierce, though even so I have known a bloodless settlement.

The reason for moving, I would hypothesize, is as much a matter of the carrot as the stick - once all the available females have been attended to, or shown themselves impervious to all forms of beguilement, there is likely to be, just now and all of a sudden, a lady over the hill whose scent is absolutely irresistible. Mostly the carrot and stick combine, particularly in the case of a juvenile in his first season: with serious beatings from the older males to make his present abode seem less desirable, and the lure of the lady over the hill, the time comes when he just, quite simply, goes.

Female dominance

The upshot of all this - the necessity for a female to protect and keep one of the rare nests suitable for raising babies, in contrast to the facility with which a male can and does change his territory - is that, as a general rule, a male gives way to a female.

Her attack is more serious, and far more strongly motivated than that of a male. The pattern is reinforced by the difference in physical size: generally speaking, females are larger than males, as well as more

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d A resident possum, that is, moving about its business at a leisurely pace; one travelling with intent, say, trying to get home, can cover incredible distances by comparison in a very short time - eight kilometres a night in the right sort of country is definitely `on'.

aggressive.

The males, as travellers, are more prone to meet with accidents - about four out of five of those killed on the roads are males, usually youngish - while the females, who remain in the same place, where the hazards are known and charted, often live to attain their full potential size. But beyond this females seem to be naturally larger, though the disparity is sometimes eliminated by the fact that the average size of possums varies from group to group.

The situation is not dissimilar to that with humans, inverted, where men are, generally speaking, larger than women, but the average size of different races varies so greatly that women from a large race are generally bigger than men from a small one. For example, Old Pink Pig, sometime the largest of the males at Newport (who planted himself beside my typewriter as I originally wrote this), was smaller than all the adult females in Jenny's family, and in the other groups of average stature, but marginally larger than the biggest member of the Foxy group, small reddish possums, originally quite distinct from the others, who live in a particular area around the creek.

seen even in play-patterns

Whatever its origins, this behaviour pattern is now innate, and shows up even in their baby play.

Joey, the little male, would have play fights with discarded clothes, cushions, pillows, my hand, or nothing at all. He made ferocious attacks (though usually gentle in the case of my hand, unless it was concealed by a cloth), characterised by thoroughly unnecessary and completely exaggerated movements, enormous pounces, up on his back legs, or up in the air, then down, collaring the objective with his hands - a kid, over-acting. He punctuated his attacks by suddenly leaping into the air, landing flat on his back, and lying there, supine, stiff, paws outstretched and partially in the air, eyes closed, obviously a dead possum.

Even in my ignorance, it was obvious to me that he was acting out losing battles. I didn't know at the time how accurate his imitations were: a possum losing a serious fight is often thrown forty feet or more to the ground, where it lies stiff on its back, apparently in a catatonic state of shock. Occasionally it screams, usually it appears to be dead, with *rigor mortis* set in. It stays like that for minutes or hours as the case may be - then it gets up and removes itself with as much dignity and appearance of normality as its injuries permit. This may be a reflex to protect the possum from predators while it recovers. If so, it's a sadly misplaced one in areas such as Ingleside, where people continually dump unwanted dogs: the pitiful spectres who prowl around there at night, rib-cage displayed in all its details, stomach hard against their backbones or swollen with malnutrition, are carrion eaters.

At the time, Joey's game just looked to me like the game of Cowboys and Indians I used to play as a child. At intervals, you're killed or seriously wounded, and you lie down and count to ten or whatever, until you're allowed to recover, or be resurrected, or reincarnated as another Indian. There still might be a connection.[e]

But I began to feel very sorry for Joey. As time went on he played his game more frequently, always with the same result, although as he grew wiser he mitigated his `sufferings' by making sure he `died' within arm's reach of me, and so got his tummy rubbed until the time came for him

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e That is to say, a connection which goes the other way: the human play pattern might conceivably date back to a time when such behaviour was indeed pro-survival. The resurrection/reincarnation and so forth would then be superimposed rationalization.

to revive. But he also had a record of unintentional defeats in his play. An attack on a pillow, toy dog, or discarded clothes always seemed to result in the enemy falling off the chair or bed on top of him, temporarily flattening him. He bears the distinction of having been defeated by a sock, and by his own tail.

The last occurred during a nightmare, when he was curled up in a circle on the bed, with his tail over his nose to seal the gap. In his dream, it somehow became a boa-constrictor. He hissed and struggled and fought, but the automatic reflex of a frightened possum which cannot escape is to cling, and the more he struggled the tighter the tail became. The combatants were separated only when he fell off the bed - a low divan. I'm very much afraid that I was laughing, and he stalked off under the bed with his dignity very much ruffled.

By the time he developed his game to the point of sophistication where he landed beside me, he was in fact being chucked twenty feet or so out of trees by adults whenever he encroached on their personal preserves (though I never saw him more than momentarily stunned, and certainly not in the supine position which characterised his play). It seemed a bit much that Joey should always lose, in his dreams, in real life, and in his games. The next time I was appointed the enemy, I duly played dead.

Joey was horrified, and extremely upset for some time. It was not because he thought I really was dead, as he did on another, later occasion when he came back one night and couldn't wake me; his reaction then was quite different, nosing me and licking me frantically to rouse me. It was because I had obviously done the wrong thing, and committed the possum *faux pas* of all time.

Joey never included `playing dead' in any of his games outside, though some of the other elements, including the enormous pounces, were present. It just isn't safe for a baby possum to `play dead' unnecessarily in the open.

I have, however, heard of another house-reared male who invented the same game for himself. I can only suppose that little males reared by their own mothers might play a very much less developed version of the same game in their nests - the restrictions imposed by lack of space would preclude, for example, the wild leaps.

The sound effects from the nests of what later prove to be male babies suggest as much, but the game as a whole would be very difficult to confirm in such circumstances, because the characteristic supine position is identical to that assumed by a possum sleeping in its favourite nest, in total security - the exposure of the vulnerable underside demands no less. The facility for stretching out full length like that is the height of possum luxury - they snuggle occasionally, and give little sighs of contentment, and dream dreams characterized by the little lip-smacking noises of a possum savouring food which is Absolutely Delicious. Most adults rarely have nests that provide space for this, and at the same time security - hence, in part, the predilection for roofs. A baby can, and very often does, stretch out on its back, sleeping happily beside its very own mother.

And the only difference between this position and the supine `dead possum' position is that in one case the muscles are stiff, in the other they couldn't be more relaxed - when Joey and Snoopy slept in that position I could, if I wanted to, move them around like a rag doll.

Snoopy, the little female, was a totally different case.

Virtually the first thing she did, when she could spare the energy from just breathing, was to attack the toggle of my duffle coat - no pseudo-suckling about it - and she proceeded from there, as she grew

stronger. She showed no signs of hostility towards me - like Joey, she was loving, gentle, obedient and pathetically loyal - but she belaboured her mock enemies unmercifully. But there was no apparent scenario in her war games, as there was in one of her other games, though it was clear from her actions that, like Joey, she was fantasizing. Both would work themselves into a frenzy, but Snoopy simply attacked her opponents until she grew tired of it.

Kylie, her daughter, was just the same, and I have seen another baby female playing the non-house version of the same game: lacking a convenient sock or cushion, she chose as her opponent a bunch of leaves.

The general behaviour of babies who come on their mothers' backs to be fed seems to point in the same direction. On the whole the little boys are shyer, more timid, trying to hide in their mother's fur, clinging to her, staying close beside her when they are older - which is why you inevitably fall for a boy, who will almost certainly leave home when he matures.

Both my little possums had nightmares, hissing and crying and struggling in their sleep, being chased and beaten up, no doubt by something fierce and hairy and trichosurine the size of an elephant. But in their waking fantasies, Joey never won a fight and Snoopy never lost one. Joey was preparing for his adolescence.

An adolescent male is the lowest form of possum life: everyone outranks him and can chase him away, and he can chase no one - the adult females because they are females, the adult males because they are bigger, and even the babies, because they still have the protection of their mothers. His only solace is to find an even smaller, more wretched adolescent male, or take it out on a fetish.

Although the basic pattern of female dominance is innate - neither of the babies had seen enough of other possums for it to be anything else - it essentially rests on the greater determination and physical size of the females. On at least two occasions I've known an exceptionally large and intelligent male to arrive in a new group, at first behave as befits a gentleman possum, then gradually come to an astonishing realization. There are smaller, easily frightened female possums in the world, and he is bigger than they are. He then proceeds to give them hell, as if to make up for all the injuries of the past. But when, as eventually happens, the female in sheer desperation finally starts to make determined attacks, he generally backs down, as the law dictates.

Social Order

As far as I can tell, in areas like Ingleside where there is plenty of vegetation, social order is more a matter of equal female neighbours, each of whom is boss in her own territory. The basic social unit is one female possum, plus dependant offspring, with a male ranging over the territories of three or more females.

However, the feed group situation, with possums from the surrounding district collecting in the same place, each as an individual, for the sake of the food (and certainly not for love of other possums), a situation more familiar to most people as the suburban hand-out session, does and must occur in nature.

Seasonal vegetation, of the sort which grows, as it often does, in limited areas, means that all the possums from the surrounding territories will have to congregate if they want a share of the spoils. And, possums being what they are, this means conflict and confrontation.

Their huge, non-retractable claws look terrible, and their teeth, which are not laniary but resemble (roughly) those of a rabbit, look comical and innocuous, and so it is commonly believed that their claws are their main weapons. Almost the reverse is true: the claws are used in

semi-ritualized boxing matches, between social equals, in a courting situation, or perhaps as an opening ploy, but when the fight becomes serious, possums bite: the claws are used only as an extension of the hands, to hold the victim while it is being bitten, with perhaps a little scrabbling with the hind feet thrown in for good measure. Social inferiors (including non-possums such as humans) are bitten on principle if stupid enough to provoke a superior.[f]

Possums are physically designed to withstand such treatment, armoured against the weapons of their fellows. The prime target is always a retreating rump, and in a healthy possum it is always very well padded; the bones of babies seem to be made of rubber, and those of adults are extremely resilient, so that being pitched twenty feet or so out of a tree results in no more than a shaking; the fur is very loose, and comes out in quantity at the slightest provocation, so that both biting and clawing often produce no more than a handful, or mouthful, of fur. After what looks and sounds like a fight to the death, you often find what looks horrifyingly like a bale of wool strewn on the ground - and two completely unscathed possums.

The fact that they are built to withstand precisely the sort of treatment meted out by Other Possums suggests that this is the sort of punishment they most frequently receive, and so again, like the occurrence of patches of seasonal vegetation, points to the conclusion that in nature as well as in the suburbs, the feed group situation, with possums assembling, each individually there for the same purpose, is not uncommon.

When such a situation occurs, then one possum dominates the others - the senior female, the largest and strongest in the area, who therefore in theory tends to own the territory in which the desired delicacy grows.

But in areas such as Ingleside, where there is plenty of space and no tendency to overpopulation, actual confrontations of the sort that would define dominance are rare.

For possums are, paradoxically, peaceful animals - always excepting the mating season. Their basic antipathy towards other possums is probably an evolutionary device to spread them as widely as the food supply allows. In conditions such as these it is often relatively easy to avoid conflict, simply by avoiding other possums. Given their ability to sit absolutely still for hours, it is easier to sit and wait until the owner of the desired vegetation has had her fill and departed for the night, or made it clear by settling down to eat somewhere else that she doesn't particularly fancy it tonight, than it is to provoke confrontation.

Since the existence of dominance depends, to a certain extent, on its frequent assertion and concomitant recognition by the subordinates, no rigid ranking system, with the owner of one territory invariably outranking the owner of the adjacent one, seems to develop in such lightly populated areas.

Evolution in action: a developing peck-order

In more built-up areas, however, the food supply, both the vegetation and that provided intentionally or otherwise by man, is concentrated into smaller patches. Similarly, the availability of nests is restricted, and several possums often occupy different parts of the same shed or roof. Consequently more frequent contact, and so conflict, with other possums is inevitable, and it is necessary for them to

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f People often complain that they picked up a possum and it attacked them, scratching them to pieces. It is probably little consolation to know that it did not attack, or they would have been bitten. It cannot retract its claws like a cat, and so accidentally scratched them in its struggles to get away. Without the protection of a possum's thick coat, the result is much the same as if it had attacked.

find a means of coming to terms with each other's proximity on fairly frequent occasions.

Those at Newport have done so by developing or modifying those aspects of their behaviour applicable to such situations when they do occur in more bushy areas. Firstly they have evolved, and, I suspect, are still evolving, a rudimentary peck-order.

For years Jenny was the reigning dominant. Once you know the group as individuals, there can be no doubt as to the identity of the dominant. All the other possums give way to her, fleeing before her after only the most token defiance, if that. In those groups I have watched, the dominant is the senior female, the largest and strongest, who owns the territory in which the desired food - in this case handouts provided by humans - is located.

Her arrival at night is marked by consternation on all sides - possums flee in all directions. You can tell that it is her coming, long before you see her, from the effect of her approach upon the others. her bearing is regal - quite literally, she owns all she surveys. She may, as a matter of principle, demonstrate her authority by chasing off the nearest possum - usually without physical contact, since the lesser mortal just goes.

Once her authority has established, matters are conducted more amicably. She becomes a benevolent tyrant, who graciously permits the others to sit at a respectful distance and feed unmolested. She asserts her authority only when necessary - a younger possum getting uppity. The others are less disturbed by her arrival, and in time, her appearance in her favourite spot just comes to mean that everything is normal, and all is well in the world.

The system is as yet rudimentary. It is only a short step from the temporary, *de facto* dominant of the bush feed-group situation to the permanent dominant recognised in virtually all contexts, in a situation where the concentration of food and suitable residences in a restricted area means that there are Other Possums, male and female, more or less permanently in what she considers to be her territory - a kind of perpetual feed-group situation.

The dominant, for example, makes no attempt to interfere in the squabbles between the others, unless their gyrations accidentally bring them close to her. Group activity still occupies only a minor part of the nightly routine, and it remains, essentially, an *ad hoc* arrangement arrived at by individual possums in particular circumstances.

From what I have seen, I would expect other groups to vary from those from which I derive my information. My observations are based primarily on four groups: at Newport, the contiguous and partially overlapping groups, Mrs. Poss's, Jenny's and Foxy's - Mrs. Poss's group was originally quite distinct, but those of Foxy and Jenny overlapped, because feeding took place on - ? established ? - the boundary between the two main female; at Ingleside, Snoopy's (or rather Kylie's) group, plus occasional encounters with the next group down the creek and a couple of neighbouring groups. It is impossible to overstress the fact that possums are thinking individuals, and as such adapt to the conditions in which they find themselves, each in his or her own way.

In all the above mentioned cases, for example, the dominant is a senior female, and I would expect this to be the general rule because it makes sense. While the deep rumbling calls at possum bed-time which we first fondly imagined to be those of a big old-man possum challenging the world may in fact be just that, it more often turns out to be the lady of the area crying her territory. But, given the right physical circumstances,

for example a very large old male as an established, honoured guest in a shed near the feed house, and only small weak juvenile females in the neighbourhood, I could well envisage at least a temporary situation where the dominant is a male, though I've never actually encountered it.

At first there seemed to be no internal peck-order at Newport or any of the other groups I have seen, beyond the principle that males give way to females, and small possums give way to larger possums. If there was, it was too ephemeral for me to detect. For even those principles can be varied with circumstances - for example a small female, closer to her nest, can outface a larger one, even the dominant, if the latter doesn't seriously covet the nest herself. Matters vary with the situation, with the individual possums involved, and, above all, with their mood.

However, in later years, changing conditions at Newport made the population crisis more severe, and so increased the pressure to develop regular solutions to the problem of co-existing with Other Possums.

More of the surrounding blocks were cleared, reducing still further the available food and shelter, concentrating it even more. Possums must go where there is food and shelter for them, so the possums in turn were concentrated more densely, on our land. The three originally separate groups interbred and partially merged, the distinction between them no longer capable of definition. The males migrated less readily: while the juvenile males still departed, one, Elephant, almost certainly went no further than the next group up the hill, while another, the singularly ill-named Blanche, may simply have changed from the Foxy group on one boundary of our property to the area which used to be occupied by Mrs. Poss's on the other. The older males tended to remain where they were.

By 1978 there were at least four males permanently living in, or frequently visiting, an area of two hectares. Big Pink Pig, or Old Pig, who took over from Joe as resident male, remained, with two younger semi-regulars, `Horrible' (almost certainly the same Horrible who first showed up at the same time as Old Pig, of whom more later) and a slightly younger adult male, Shy Boy. And, in addition, there was now, finally, the exception to prove the rule, Timmy, already notorious for being a July (1976) baby, the juvenile male who didn't depart. (Or rather, he departed for a whole two weeks, then returned, still carrying the same minor injuries and scars, with no doubt at all as to his identity.)

Timmy seemed to be doing a kind of Castor and Pollux with Pig: while I never established Pig's exact range, since it took him off our property, I knew the direction in which he went, and Timmy followed the same route, except that, accidents aside, where Pig was at a given time, Timmy wasn't; Pig seldom if ever slept at our house; Timmy did so intermittently, but was there more frequently than he was absent.

These four developed a well-defined peck-order, or, more accurately, chase-order, of their own, ranking primarily according to size and seniority. Pig, obviously the oldest and largest, clearly outranked the other three. Then came `Horrible', then Shy Boy, not much younger or smaller, but of an even more timorous nature: `Horrible' alternated between extreme timidity and extreme temerity, from one to the other within a matter of minutes; Shy Boy had panphobia virtually all the time. Then, lowest of the low, was Timmy.

Timmy's position in regard to `Horrible' and Shy Boy did, however, become more fluid. While Shy Boy was older, he derived his name from his nature, whereas Timmy was a singularly brash and bumptious young man. Given the changing conditions, the pattern of juvenile male departure was bound to be broken sooner or later, and he was certainly always the most likely candidate.

One evening, first Timmy, then Shy Boy, came to my window for bread. When Shy Boy first approached, Timmy dropped the half-eaten slice of bread he was holding and snatched up a full slice, preparatory to retreating with what he could carry - the only time, incidentally, I've ever seen a possum have the nous to exchange a partially eaten slice for a full one under such circumstance. In the event, he retreated only as far as the next window. When both he and Shy Boy had finished eating, Shy Boy turned to leave. Timmy capitalised on the situation by starting after him, hesitantly at first, then more purposefully, and Shy Boy duly considered himself chased and increased his pace to a run.

The following night there was a similar confrontation between Timmy and `Horrible'. This time Timmy arrived when `Horrible' was already eating, and showed signs of aggression. `Horrible' hesitated, but apparently decided not to exchange his mouthful of bread for a doubtful mouthful of Timmy, and made a fairly leisurely departure.

Personality, as well as physical size, plays a part in the acquisition of rank, and Timmy's intelligence and natural pugnacity[v] were on the verge of making up for what he lacked in bulk and experience, where Shy Boy and `Horrible' were concerned.

Not Seeing

There are a great many individual, specific ways by which possums circumvent their own behaviour patterns when to follow them ceases to be beneficial, but there are also some standard tricks. The most important of these is Not Seeing.

This is a rather more positive action than simply ignoring.[vi]

I have seen a similar type of behaviour in two male dogs, who for years threatened each other almost daily through a barrier - `If only I could get at you, I'd tear you to pieces' - all the while secure in the knowledge that the barrier prevented them from ever having to make good their claims.

Then one day the barrier was accidentally, and suddenly, removed, to the great consternation of both parties.

They were approximately equal in size and fighting capability - whichever one actually won, there would be damage on both sides. While it was one thing to threaten mayhem from safety, neither in fact wanted to risk real injury.

They resolved the problem by pretending very hard that it didn't exist. Somehow neither dog could see the other. The dog who found himself in the other's territory trotted slowly through with his head turned away from his inveterate enemy, avoiding, by his deliberate gait, any appearance of flight which might provoke an attack; the territory owner, in turn, concentrated very hard on imaginary somethings elsewhere, everywhere else, anywhere but where the intruder was.

As soon as the barrier was replaced, the situation reverted to normal, and unpleasantries were exchanged with all the usual ferocity.

In possums, male and female, Not Seeing becomes a fine art. If, for reasons of prudence, convenience, or occasionally something like mercy for a juvenile that poses no serious threat, a possum does not wish to fight another, it is faced with a quandary. The rule dictates that Another Possum must be attacked and chased away.

But if it doesn't know there is Another Possum there, then it is not obliged to do anything. It therefore faces firmly in the opposite direction from the offending presence, making slow ritualized movements to be sure the Other Possum sees them – otherwise the turning of the head might be taken as the beginning of flight, or the Other Possum might think it has really not been spotted, and in either case launch an attack. No power on earth will persuade the first possum to look at the ‘invisible’ one, unless

the Other Possum upsets the *status quo* by approaching. The non-existent one may stay where it is - in which case Not Seeing can last for as many hours as necessary - or drift away into a less hazardous location. Where both possums have reason to be in the same place, Not Seeing can be mutual, and continue for a very long time.

It is, in fact, a method of communication: it tells the other possum that, provided it observes etiquette, it will be favoured with no unwelcome attentions.

Not Seeing to this degree is an adult art. The babies almost always genuinely ignore each other. In my ignorance, on several occasions I placed one youngster in the same tree as another when the stranger's mother was occupied elsewhere. The two youngsters took no notice of each other whatsoever. Each happily played its own private game which it had developed for that particular tree.

Just as two adult possums feeding in the same vicinity are two adult possums each independently there for the same reason, the food, so two baby possums playing in the same tree are two baby possums each independently playing with the tree. They do not play with each other.

They seem, for the most part, genuinely unaware of each other's presence: like puppies or kittens separated from their kind, they are, for the most part, wrapped up in their own fantasy world. They will play with their mother, if she can spare the time and has the inclination, but there is no real group activity voluntarily indulged in even by babies.

Possums also possess a basic tact, which, coupled with a firm knowledge of each other's behavioural patterns, comes to their rescue in awkward situations for which there is no regular solution.

The best illustration I can think of occurred in the mating season after Joey disappeared.

Just as possums congregate in feed groups when the desired food is in limited supply, each possum there independently for its own purposes, so too they congregate in the mating season. We called such gatherings, for want of a better term, `conventions'.

On this occasion the convention took place over the hill from us, at another house where a group was fed regularly. I was there looking for Joey: mating conventions are larger than normal feed groups, with members of surrounding groups combining, and some of our regulars had joined this one.

I saw a male courting a female - the egregious Jenny. He had her trapped on the end of a branch, and matters were proceeding as per usual - he making wheedling, cajoling advances, she repelling him with roars and handful of claws in the face; whereupon he would retire to the other end of the branch, and, after a pause, try again. Matters, so far as I could judge, were just about coming to a head.

There was a tall, straight sapling adjacent to the branch, a couple of feet from Jenny's end, and, as the would-be Romeo made another of his advances towards her, a second male suddenly shot up the sapling, between them.

Had they been anything but possums, it would have been Sir Galahad to the rescue of a lady receiving unwanted attentions. But possums they were, and what had obviously happened was that the second male, in his eagerness, had failed to notice that Jenny already had a suitor and catapulted himself into an impossible situation.

Even at that stage I knew that they were too close together. If either male turned to go, he would be attacked - a retreating rump at that distance just had to be bitten. And Jenny herself had nowhere to go.

After a face-to-face confrontation a few inches apart, Not

Seeing was out of the question - in any case, even the turning of the head required for Not Seeing might, when they were so close together, be interpreted as a sign of flight, and so provoke an attack.

They all froze, staring at each other. Nothing could happen but bloody massacre. The tableau remained motionless and the minutes ticked by. The tension mounted.

Then, at last - all three simultaneously decided that it was time for lunch.

They browsed for a few minutes, with the mood relaxed, then the interloper just sort of drifted away. And Jenny and the first male took up where they had left off.

Behaviour towards known neighbours

Established neighbours do in fact develop a great deal of tolerance for each other. Once each has established its presence and favourite position, its critical distance and general personality becomes known to all the others. Fights are less frequent, because everyone knows how to avoid them, and, when they occur, tend to be ritualized.

Possums move with lightening speed when they are serious, but these ritualized combats are, by comparison, virtually in slow motion, and the key gestures, actions and body positions are deliberate and exaggerated. Each possum is given every opportunity to know what the other is doing, and what it intends to do, and respond according to etiquette. The risk of serious injury to either party is therefore reduced.

If one of the permanent females disappears, her presence is missed by the others, in the same sort of way they might miss a tree that falls down. They live in a world where survival is achieved only by a narrow margin - straying from a scent trail can mean being taken by a predator and so forth - so they are very much creatures of habit, and any major change is disconcerting until it is shown to be harmless.[g]

Behaviour towards strangers

There is a very marked difference between their attitude to known neighbours and their attitude to strangers, particularly females. Again the best illustration I can think of is an incident involving Jenny, the reigning dominant at Newport, then in her prime, Foxy, a female neighbour of a couple of years' standing, and Sally, a stranger.

At the time the groups which lived on, or overlapped with, our property were physically quite distinctive, each with unmistakable family traits.

Jenny's group, centred on our house, were true silver greys, dark grey fur with silver tips, medium to large sized possums with extra long ears, medium to long snouts, narrowish faces and dainty features - all very pretty possums, far more like miniature wallabies than the rather broad, blunt-featured pop-eyed possums who appear as typical examples in illustrations.

Foxy and her descendants, who centred around the creek and lived in that region and on the property adjacent to ours on that side, were also very pretty possums, but smaller, with a pronounced russet tone in the colouring of males and females alike, short-eared, and with tiny triangular faces, shorter in the snout than the Jenny-possums, with sharp little features.

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g. By the same token, and for the same reason, they are also exceedingly curious - they occupy the same ecological niche as monkeys, and in this respect resemble them; or, say, a kitten with hands. Nothing delights them more than exploring something new and pleasurable, once they know it to be harmless.

Jenny, too, had a distinctive face mark, a chevron over the nose, with a dark line from its apex running up the middle of her snout between her eyes, and she passed it on in one form or another to most of her descendants. Foxy's face-markings were different, and although the Jenny-mark soon appeared among her descendants, and I've since seen it elsewhere in apparently unrelated groups, at the time, and in that place, it was a dead giveaway.

At one point I wondered whether I hadn't got my labels mixed up - Jenny's people are certainly *trichosurus vulpecula vulpecula* (Hairy one, little fox, little fox), but Foxy's matched very closely descriptions of *Trichosurus caninus*. However, I found on enquiry that the two sorts of brush-tails aren't supposed to be able to interbreed, and interbreed they certainly did, under the ministrations of Joe, who, whether Joey or not, was certainly a Jenny-poss.

Sally was quite different again, and different, too, from the other major group which straddled the fence-line on the opposite side of the property from Foxy, Mrs. Poss's stubby, ursine family. I encountered her for the first time prior to the incident in question in a group of palms about a hundred feet from the house, up the creek from Foxy's group.

She was reclining on her back in a multi-coloured lantana bush, her great flat feet stuck up in the air, wading into the lantana with great gusto and lip-smacking approval. She was long and lanky, grey like Jenny's mob, but slightly lighter in colour. She had a very long, flat, unattractive-looking snout, with face-markings so light as to be virtually invisible, doing nothing to mitigate the unfortunate shape of her face. She was awkward and ugly and completely engaging. A possum ingénue.

The place she frequented was a kind of no-man's land, on the boundary of several feed-groups, and I occasionally saw possums from Jenny's, Foxy's or Mrs. Poss's groups browsing there, particularly when the palms were in flower. Sally was a peripheral member of a group from an adjacent property, further up the hill - I met her kindred on occasions further in that direction. She was never one of my regulars, although I gave her a handout if I happened to walk there, and she was present and asked for it. Possibly, given her location, she wasn't a regular member of the far group either, and that was why she decided to try her luck with my lot.

At this time, handouts were given at a group of trees which seemed to overlap the boundary between Jenny's and Foxy's domains. Foxy and her assorted babies, half-grown offspring and mature daughters on the whole, at that period, stayed in the trees within this copse which were further from the house, Jenny and her people the reverse, though there was a large cedar wattle nearby which was a seasonal attraction and used, with discretion, by all possums. Foxy herself made only occasional expeditions into the area immediately surrounding the house - when, for example, she came too late for her handout and had to draw our attention to herself to get it.

On this particular occasion, however, when the handouts had been eaten and they had all settled down, as they usually do, to browsing in the trees in which they were sitting before going off for the night on their individual business, Foxy encroached on Jenny's preserve by a few trees.

A leisurely chase ensued. Jenny chased Foxy in a bored, perfunctory, and thoroughly ritualized manner. It was, for a possum, slow motion. Jenny made no serious attempt to catch up with Foxy, and Foxy made no serious attempt to get away. The distance between them remained the same, and they described a slow near-circle, at the end of which Foxy was back across the invisible border, in one of her customary trees, and Jenny

was on the other side of it, a respectable distance of a couple of trees away, in hers. Both settled down to eat again.

About ten minutes later, the real stranger, Sally, appeared in Jenny's zone. Jenny flew at her, and Sally fled for dear life into the night.

Foxy and Jenny knew each other, and accepted each other, provided etiquette was observed. Each had her own nests, and neither posed a threat to the other - Foxy never slept at the house, and seldom came near it. Each had sufficient natural food at her command, and each knew that if she cared to present herself at handout time I'd make sure she got her fair share. There was no real competition between them.

Sally was a different matter altogether. She was a possum whom they must have seen around occasionally, but essentially an outsider, and as such represented a potential danger to nests and food supply. She never repeated the experiment, but found herself a small between-territories niche up the creek from Foxy, not far from the palms where I first met her.

A strange male is a different proposition. Arriving and departing males are a frequent phenomenon of possum life, and a new face, or, more importantly, a new smell, comes as no real surprise.

If there's a larger, established male, there's bound to be trouble, and no doubt the ladies of the district will handle him severely at first. But, particularly if the erstwhile resident male has already departed of his own accord, he has a reasonable chance of staying on, always provided he conducts himself according to etiquette.

Mating

Given their violent antipathy to each other, mating presents a problem. It is achieved, on the whole, bloodily.

The standard practice is for the male to approach the female, making soft cajoling noises which are a variant of the basic kook-kook-kook call, extending his nose towards her, hopefully. She repels him with great vigour, and a handful of claws, roaring and hissing, removing as much of his facial fur as possible. He retreats, then comes back for a repetition.

She, in turn, starts to get tired of these unwanted attentions after a while, and leaves if she can. He follows her, if possible trapping her at the end of a branch or in some such situation, and resumes his entreaties with ever-hopeful nose stuck out towards her. If she becomes furious enough, she makes a determined attack, and chases him far enough to let her escape from the branch. He just follows her and renews his attentions.

Mating involves the temporary abrogation of one of the most fundamental possum laws of all, that no other adult possum shall be allowed within `critical distance', and above all that no physical contact with Another Possum is permitted. It is characterized by retreats and advances on both sides, and takes a good deal of time - several nights -, and space - a courting couple gradually progresses from tree to tree. When daylight forces them to take shelter, the female returns to her nest, and the male to his. They meet again the following night, and take up from where they left off.

Gradually the male's persistence wears her down. She lets him come closer and closer, and her attacks, though still furious, gradually abate as her own instinct becomes roused. The performance still looks like a fight to an inexperienced eye, and it certainly sounds like one, but the aggressive gestures gradually become more ritualized, until, eventually, they become, quite literally, love-pats. And, once you've heard it often enough, you can tell that the lady who is still saying, `No,' isn't quite so adamant any more, and she will eventually say, `Yes'.

In the end, either she does, and he mounts her, or, if the male

is impatient and the female small and weak, he is close enough to just jump her anyway, `rape'[vii] her, in fact. Young, inexperienced males, adolescents at the peak of their sexual excitability, are more prone to do so than older males, who observe the rules and patiently endure the punishment meted out to them.

The process is very hard on the males, and many of them are unrecognisable from face-markings alone by the end of the season. How little facial fur a male has left is something of a guide to his proclivities, if not his prowess.

Occasionally a pair of possums do fall in love, and they are lovely to watch. Usually it's two young possums, both about the same age, possibly because they still retain memories of the tender relationship between mother and baby. They pet each other gently, and play together, and stay in each other's company for a couple of nights. As far as I know, they don't, however, sleep together during the day.[viii]

On the whole, the males come to the females, but where necessary the females travel short distances to find the males. Neighbouring groups combine at one of the feed spots, usually where there is favoured seasonal vegetation.

As I said, the process of mating itself involves the abrogation of what, at other times, is a basic possum law, and the concentration of possums in one place means an increase in tension and friction - `critical distance' cannot help but be infringed, and frequently, by comparative strangers. The result is chaos.

Tempers fray, and serious fights erupt in all directions. There are possums everywhere.

Weaker possums are driven away, usually the juveniles who came out of the pouch the previous season. In the preceding weeks, as they mature, they will have lost the protection of their mothers and the tolerance of the other adults: they will have started to look more and more like Another Possum, and thus been attracting more and more hostile attention. Now, bewildered by the totally unprecedented situation, with strange, hostile teeth wherever they turn, their first reaction is to get away to somewhere quiet - if they can.

Young females are frequently terrified by the hurly-burly. The basic rules, that a possum must never allow Another Possum within `critical distance' and that males give way to females, are innate, as is the mating instinct, but the courtship process is not necessarily so. Some young females - and I <u>don't</u> necessarily mean hand-reared ones - simply don't understand what's going on at first. They behave as usual, but the males, instead of retreating as they should, simply keep coming closer and closer, and trap them in places from which they cannot extricate themselves. As small females they are the most frequent targets for `rape' by the larger males, so there is not enough time for their own sexual instinct to be fully aroused: after it's over they run as far and as fast as they can. Males, attracted by first one, then another, irresistible scent, appear and disappear all over the place.

Possums are on the move in all directions, showing up in places where they've never been seen before, appearing in broad daylight, and, more tragically, dead on the roads. A panic-stricken possum, trying to reach safety, will run unthinkingly across an open space it would otherwise never dare to cross. Possums are nocturnal, and sudden headlights blind them and make them terrified and disorientated. Their natural reaction is to freeze, or at least run blindly, and simply tooting the horn at them, without slowing down, is only going to make matters worse.

There are two mating seasons, spring, and the major one in

autumn. One doesn't have to know anything about possums to know when they occur in any given locality. You can always tell by the road kills.

For an individual female, the operative part of the mating season lasts until she has successfully mated, or is no longer on heat - ovulation seems to be possible throughout the year, and out-of-season babies are occasionally born, but motivation reaches a peak in spring and especially in autumn. Either way, an individual female mating, from the beginning of the courtship to consummation, lasts about three to five days, a week at most. Whereupon all she wants to do is get back and secure her nest, and recover from the chaos.

The males, however, are not so regular in their desires - they will make unseasonable approaches at any time of year, on the off chance, though outside the mating season they will accept a rebuff as final. In the mating season, they mate with as many females as possible, as quickly as possible. When one mating is over, and the female returns to her nest, the male simply starts all over again with the nearest available female he hasn't successfully courted. In a given location, therefore, the mating season lasts until every male in the vicinity is convinced that every female within reach means what she says, and is once more unapproachable. Which takes weeks.

He then, depending on his own enthusiasm, either tries his luck further afield, or, if it is late in the season, settles down where he is, if he can. And his other great interest in life once more becomes important - food, particularly the luxury tit-bits provided by humans, and how to get it. And fun - a lot of male possums retain their childhood interest in exploring for its own sake and climbing acrobatically, and the typical suburbanite male is only too delighted to have a human audience, particularly a paying one, to admire him and provide him with diversion in turn. People watch possums, but possums also watch people.

Mother and Baby

There is only one inter-possum relationship which lasts more than a few days, and is tender and affectionate: that between mother and baby. There couldn't be a greater antithesis to the rest of their behaviour towards each other.

It's as if all their aggressiveness and ferocity is channelled outwards towards the rest of the possum world, and all their gentleness (except that reserved for trusted humans) inwards towards each other. The baby is fed and washed and cuddled and petted by its mother; it responds with every possible sign of affection and trust and loyalty, snuggling up to her, licking her, watching her with adoring eyes, shooting questioning looks towards her whenever it finds something new - Is it safe? Is it good?

The first one usually sees of the baby in a house-group situation is when the mother brings it on her back, although it has actually been sleeping out of the pouch, cuddled up beside her in the nest, for three or four weeks prior to its first public appearance. It will, however, have appeared publicly in part during this period: as the mother sits eating her food and relaxes, her pouch muscles slacken and the pouch gapes a little - the baby is almost too big for it anyway - and there is forever a disembodied leg or tail or ear left outside. A possum who knows you very well may let you take a quick look at the baby in the pouch at this stage, once it is properly furred and well developed - but please be careful not to shine light into the baby's eyes, since they are very sensitive when they first develop: apparently the baby lacks the muscular co-ordination needed to contract the pupil to compensate. Even at this stage, however, the mother can close her pouch very tightly if danger threatens, and flatten it, almost to the point where the bulge is invisible, in order to move quickly.

The transition from pouch to back is not abrupt: the baby often

takes one look, decides that the world is a big, cold, frightening place, and dives back into the pouch again very hastily. The mother, incidentally, does not assist it to do so, except by holding still while it scrambles desperately to get inside, and sometimes not even that - she moves off with the little one still struggling frantically to fit as much of itself as possible back into a place that's now too small for it. Depending on how mature the baby is on its first appearance[h] it spends only short periods outside the pouch at first, gradually increasing their duration and frequency until it comes out altogether.

For the first few nights it is usually very timid and bewildered. Light hurts its eyes and frightens it, it is surrounded by a multitude of strange and inexplicable sounds and smells. It clings very tightly to its mother's back, and tries to hide in her fur.

After a few days, however, it starts to take an interest in what she's eating, and then takes a couple of tentative nibbles itself. Sometimes the first bite reveals and unimagined heaven, sometimes it is not so successful. But after a few days the baby is regularly sharing its mother's food, and soon can manage a tiny bit from the same source on its own account, though most are prudently diffident about this when offered food by a human: it is better for it to take it from its mother, so accepting her judgment as to what is edible and what isn't. Possum mothers display a great deal of tact - even a normally jittery mother will munch placidly in this situation, to reassure the baby that everything is all right.

With an intelligent mother it can go further than this. Sometimes when a precocious baby has importuned a piece of food from a human, the mother will drop what she is eating, often more of the same thing, and take the piece from the baby, hastily gobbling it up. Since a few nights later the same mother will ignore whatever the baby is given, it seems possible that in some such instances she considered the baby was too young to eat whatever it was, and acted to protect her endangered offspring.

There is little else she can do in such circumstances. Mothers do not normally discipline their own babies - the less pleasant part of their education is left to the tender mercies of Other Possums they inadvertently offend. I know of only one instance. Cassie, a daughter of `Miri', was only a few days out of the pouch, and just starting on solids properly, when she mistakenly started to eat my hand instead of the food it was holding - a not uncommon error, since both hand and apple look the same colour in the moonlight, and the hand would smell of apple and vice versa, so it must be very hard for a young baby to tell where one finishes and the other begins. `Miri' instantly quelled her with a severe look, similar to the mild threat used as a parking order to override the baby's automatic reflex to follow its mother, a gesture probably best translated as, `Uh-uh! Don't do that!'

Jenny, too, had a trick all her own. Babies must grow up and learn to get their own food by their own efforts. Once her baby had grown accustomed to sharing her food, she had a habit of turning and facing away from the food, too large for the baby to handle on its own. The baby learnt to `steal' its mother's food during her apparent inattention. Only the fact that Jenny tended to overact a little, and that her torso was twisted into a

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h. This varies, some mothers keeping them in the pouch until they are quite large, others, particularly smaller possums with smaller pouches, by force or choice carrying them on their backs when they are less mature. But Jenny, a large possum, tended to have them on her back early, while Foxy, a small possum, kept them in so long that she resembled a ball with a tiny head on top.

thoroughly uncomfortable position, gave the game away to an observer.[ix]

Development of the Baby

The separation and growing independence of the baby follows a pattern, though, like the transition between pouch and back, it is not abrupt. The stages do not follow one after the other without backsliding. It is a matter of a gradually developing tendency to do one thing rather than another.

In the nest, the baby at first sleeps cuddled up to its mother, her arms enfolding it, or stretched out beside her, with one of her arms around it. Then, as its self-confidence increases, it sleeps with her but separately, in the same nest. When it is a few months old, it takes up residence in some nearby nest, but often discovers that it isn't quite as grown-up as it thought, and goes home to Mummy after a few days. It moves out again, however, and remains in a nearby nest until it finally leaves home - for far places if it is a male, but preferably for somewhere close to the main food supply if it is a female, depending on the circumstances.

Outside, the baby first travels in the mother's pouch, then on her back, then trails behind her. Again the stages overlap: a baby who has only just come out of the pouch will go back to it if it becomes cold or frightened, one just learning to trail will get back on board if it starts to wear out - or take a flying leap on to its mother's back in a crisis. It varies with the individual: some start trailing when they are still spending part of the time in the pouch.

While still travelling on her back it will start to get off and sit beside her when she stops to eat, as described above. It gradually starts making expeditions further away from her as it becomes more active, only a few feet at first, on business of its own, playing while she meditates, exploring a little, investigating, returning to her at intervals for reassurance and encouragement, or to make sure that everything it's doing <u>is</u> all right. If it strays too far, she calls it back, either vocally or by just looking firmly in its direction, even though its back is to her. (I think this is done by smell, something I'll discuss later.) If it becomes confused as to the way back, or runs into trouble and starts bleating, she'll go and collect it, defending it if necessary.

It gradually moves further away on its own business, at first in the same tree, then, by the time it's a couple of months old, in immediately adjacent trees. At this point it sometimes gets tired of waiting for its mother to take it home, and one night it returns to the nest of its own accord. If this experiment proves successful it starts to make a practice of it. Then it discovers that it can go out without its mother, as well as coming home, and finally starts going and coming back entirely on its own.

There is still a degree of maternal protection, as it naturally goes initially to those places which its mother frequents, because those are the routes it knows. But possums, particularly young ones, are curious as well as cautious, and it gradually explores further and further from the set path - an adult will stick more religiously to the same route for safety's sake. So in time the youngster develops its own favourite haunts, browsing and meditation places, and a separate nightly routine peculiarly its own.

The emotional separation is equally uneven - the youngster gradually develops its own sense of possumhood and personal inviolability, but it's back to Mummy in a crisis, or just when it feels like being babied.

The separation is sometimes initiated by the baby, particularly a female baby, at quite an early stage. The mother washes the baby at first, though it starts making little reflex grooming motions in response; part of the washing process, as with very young puppies, entails cleaning out the baby's bowels, by suction. The mother's action is vigorous, and it obviously hurts the baby, who starts to protest vociferously. It begins to

object not only to being cleaned in this manner, but to anything which might lead to it.

Its own personal territorial sense, the knowledge that Another Possum must not be allowed in close proximity to it, becomes stronger and stronger. This goes hand in hand with the change in sleeping arrangements and the establishment of its own nightly routine, and it comes to regard its own mother as Another Possum. Any attempt to mother it becomes an affront to its incipient adulthood - though it, of course, still feels free to approach her when it feels like being mothered.

At the same time, the youngster gradually begins to look more and more like Another Possum to its mother. Finally the stage is reached when it is either an over-familiar, over-importunate young male to be chased off, or a young female who represents a danger to her nest and food supply.

And a very particular danger at that, since the youngster's own daily routine, through her upbringing, leads her to frequent the same places as her mother, having acquired the same taste (and possums are very idiosyncratic in food matters) for the particular vegetation that grows in her mother's territory. Furthermore, if she has moved from her mother's nest to an adjacent one, it is usually one of the mother's alternative ones. There is real competition.

How fierce it is, and how far the loser has to move, depends on the character of the individual possums, their physical capabilities, and the availability of food and accommodation. A fortunate youngster may settle down nearby, and gradually achieve the status of a tolerated neighbour, so that a group of possums with a family resemblance grows up.

The break between mother and daughter is not necessarily abrupt or complete, and some possums appear to recognise their own children longer than others; Foxy, for example, kept her babies with her in the nest until the next one was actually in the pouch, so that when she missed a season the preceding daughter was a yearling before being separated from her mother. On one occasion, and probably two more, I have seen a mother, already pregnant again, protect a juvenile daughter that had already mated, by deliberately exposing herself to a predator to draw attention away from the cornered youngster. In some cases the main factor in the alienation between mother and daughter is not the mother's hostility towards a rival for her territory, but the daughter's own eventual declaration of independence.

The pattern of departure of young males seems more abrupt, and I can only speculate on the reasons. For female behaviour patterns I have Snoopy and her daughter Kylie, both raised in the house, and Kylie's two daughters, Shrimp and Bindi, who were raised in the roof over my head, where, after a time and visual confirmations, every movement could be followed by ear, when not by eye, as well as the general out-of-the nest behaviour of those who come to be fed. For males, I have only Joey's behaviour, which may well be a-typical since he was hand-reared, although it chimes in well enough with what I've seen of the behaviour of young males in the feed group - those who depart and those who arrive - in particular with that of Jenny's next baby, Twiddly, who frequently visited my room.

As they mature, they provoke more and more hostility from the adults, particularly the males. Their visits to the feed place, whether a favoured tree in flower or a house where food is provided, become more infrequent as they involve more beatings. Joey, at this stage, simply stayed in my room, very reluctant to go out, and even if I reverted to the earlier practice of taking him out he'd simply go up a tree, to satisfy me, then come straight down and head for home, with me trailing after him. An occasional encounter suggests that others skulk in the bush, and get their food from the staple vegetation, away from the prized delicacy of the moment

which attracts the adults. If they come at all, they come late, when the others have departed for the night, and take whatever is left over, without getting into trouble.

At some time during this period they mature sexually - quite suddenly, of course. They smell the scent of a female who is all at once quite irresistible. To judge by the new arrivals I've seen, young male possums are, surprise of surprises, highly excitable, not to say over-sexed. They are as lecherous as satyrs. They are less likely to take `No' for an answer, more likely to jump the gun before the female is ready, and more likely to take risks in pursuit.

If the first love they scent is over the hill, that's where they go. This is the more likely eventuality, since they themselves have been haunting the periphery of the area frequented by the local adults. If she's one of the locals, then they come into conflict with the larger males and are driven away.

Their departure does not, however, always result from being chased. I can think of three Newport male juveniles, Joey, Twiddly and Pekky, who weathered the storm and remained until after the immediately local mating season, only to depart quite suddenly. But I can't remember any before Timmy - who went not at all - who stayed long, or at least failed to absent himself for a considerable period, after he physically matured.

Attitude towards other species

Possum rules apply to possums only. As far as I can gather, a possum's world view consists of dividing fauna into possums and non-possums, just as humans divide it into man and animal. Non-possums are treated generically or individually, as circumstances require.

There are neutral non-possums. Ring-tails, for example, are neutral non-possums: they `don't count'. They don't present any serious competition. Ring-tails build their own bird-like nests in suitable bushes and saplings, native, or, where appropriate, imported types such as lantana, while bushy-tails seek out ready-made secure dark enclosed places, preferably with a narrow, difficult entrance that can be easily defended from the inside. While both species eat some of the same vegetation, the overlap occurs in varieties which are plentiful; I only ever met one ring-tail who would accept human food of the sort which delights a bushy-tail, and he could well have been one hand-reared by a neighbour some years before.

Bandicoots, and in particular bush-rats, are non-possums, but the size and general appearance of the latter, and the fact that they tend to inhabit the same sort of places and eat the same sort of food results in a slight degree of confusion - they <u>might</u> be baby possums.

The brightest rats can exploit this situation by stealing food from the possums, with impunity. One of the funniest things I've seen in this regard involved a Newport baby called Piglet.[i] He was sitting up beside his mother, happily chomping his own miniature piece of bread, when a rat flashed out of a crack, and his dinner vanished. He didn't even see it go. He goggled, and peered around, amazed and bewildered, then angry, looking for someone to bite - but all he could see was his mummy, and she was much too big. More frequently, there is a titanic struggle over a piece of bread between a baby possum a few inches long and an adult rat of the same size; neither tries to attack the other, but each concentrates on trying to get possession of the prize. Usually the rat, being an adult,

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i. I wish to place it on record that I am in no way responsible of Old Pig's name; he didn't look in the least like a pig to me, nor were his manners particularly reprehensible, rather the reverse. But if that <u>was</u> a Pig, this, quite clearly, was a Piglet.

wins, but the mother possum does not interfere. Apparently she is afraid of committing an impropriety against a baby of her own kind.

However, it is not always the possum who loses by the association. Bushy-tails don't seem to build proper nests, but are dedicated opportunists where finding them is concerned. Bush-rats build quite splendid nests from grass, twigs and any other suitable material they can find. I know of one case where both rats and possums were living in the same roof, and a possum was snugly ensconced in a marvellously constructed rats' nest. The rats, apparently dispossessed, had built another nearby.

Cats and dogs are non-possums to be treated with caution, as potential predators, until they are known to be safe - either non-killers by nature, or confined at certain times of night. Discretion and discrimination between individuals are the key-words with them.[x]

Possums, Horses, and Humans

There are at least two desirable sorts of non-possum, though it is generally recognised that individuals vary, and possums usually wait and watch for a few days before making an approach.

Horses are mildly desirable non-possums because they live in stables, where there are often nesting places and exotic food available. Occasionally, one finds a situation where there is some sort of bond between one particular possum and one particular horse, the possum paying nightly visits to the horses stall, and being permitted to take some of the food from the horse's feed-bin. In other words, the possum gets his `handout' from his horse, in the same way that another possum might get his handout from his human.

Humans are desirable non-possums for the same reasons. Where they are, there is often good food, whether in the form of handouts, or food left out for them - they don't know that the garbage and litter strewn along the roadside isn't intentionally left for them. There is also likely to be desirable accommodation. Good nests, where they have room to stretch out on their backs, but still be secure from intruders, tend to occur in roofs and sheds.

Furthermore, it is known by possums who have had the experience that some humans can be trained to produce food at a time and place convenient to the possum, that humans can be good company - they certainly don't act like Other Possums - and occasionally helpful with extra dinner if a possum is having a bad time through injury or illness, making it temporarily difficult for it to travel as far as it needs to to feed.

Possums who are accustomed to gentle treatment from humans like humans. Those who are accustomed to being handled tolerate it, though only a very few seem to actually like it, and then always provided their individual right to privacy is respected and their own peculiar rules for inter-special contact are observed.

Since these rules do in fact vary greatly with the individual possum, it is easy to infringe them inadvertently, and then they can do you a great deal of damage, deliberately with their teeth, or coincidentally with their claws. And you can cause a great deal of distress to the possum. I, for one, am unwilling to touch a strange possum - or any possum for that matter - unless and until it shows signs of wanting physical contact with me. Except, of course, in an emergency.

The worst things you can to are: to pick up an adult possum, especially without warning - it is trapped, in a situation not of its own choosing, its personal privacy is being invaded, and its adulthood is being insulted - being carried is for babies! Or, to disturb a sleeping possum in its nest: the nest is chosen, and usually deliberately kept secret, for reasons of security; with a female, it is the core of her territory, emotionally if not topographically, and as such the core of her emotional

being. Some indeed choose nests where the position is known to their own humans, and are quite delighted to pop their heads out for a treat, on cue, in the daytime - that's probably part of the reason they chose the nest in the first place. But that is their choice, and hand suddenly shoved inside the nest without warning is likely to be dealt with by possum law, as a reflex action.

It does not hurt, in this respect, to indulge in a little anthropomorphism, and think how you would feel if a gigantic possum's paw suddenly appeared through the bedroom window in the middle of the night.

Could someone who can draw please supply an appropriate cartoon?

Even so, if the possum is awake, it will almost always warn repeatedly, and in the last analysis nip - a hard pinch that doesn't break the skin - before biting. It is, of course, physically capable of taking the top of a finger effectively off, if it really means it.

But one of the warning gestures is very ritualized, and hard to recognise unless you are familiar with it. Common justice says that you cannot blame a possum who bites you after repeated warnings; common sense says that you don't provoke the situation unless necessary.

About the only way to get on with possums, or, for that matter, most other animals, is to accord them the same degree of courtesy you would a human of similar age and familiarity of acquaintance. For, far more than domestic animals, adult possums are adults, and the fact that their intelligence is more limited than that of an adult human does not prevent them from having their own dignity, and resenting babying tones and patronizing attitudes.

And, as always in inter-special relationships, when a conflict arises, the onus is on the more intelligent species to make the concessions. Theoretically, we can comprehend their world, their rules and values, and make appropriate allowances, but we can hardly expect them, with their more limited intelligence, to comprehend the complexities of ours.

While I was looking for Snoopy, I found that there must be somewhere between one and two thousand possums in this area, but I've never met a `wild' possum, in the sense that it hadn't had contact with people. Virtually all of them are used to coming to houses for food left out - intentionally or otherwise. Some, those who have known friendly people, will come to you of their own accord. Others shy away - perhaps as a result of less friendly relations. Most simply regard you from a distance, with caution, until they are sure your intentions are harmless, and your business isn't with them, then go on with their own. They have their own human friends, but you're not one of them, and there is no point in risking an approach. You are a neutral non-possum, deemed to be a potential predator until proven otherwise, then simply ignored.

But none of them don't know what sort of a thing a human being is.

In this district possums live in their greatest numbers in places where there are both houses and trees, and are entirely absent only in completely built-up areas. They have, like all possums, adapted their behaviour so that they can discharge their necessary activities under the

conditions in which they find themselves, at the same time seeking out the best conditions they can.

To put them in human terms, they live in a kind of parallel world to ours, a world which contains the same physical objects, but where those objects often have an entirely different significance, and an entirely different use. They have their own laws, some innate, some learned through experience, and for the most part they obey them. They have their own system of land tenure - they own territories just as much as humans do - but the two systems do not coincide. They establish their territories according to possum needs and capabilities, not according to human fence lines. They have their own roads, predominantly above ground routes, well established, each twist and turn created for a good reason in the first place, then maintained by habit, sometimes even after the conditions which gave rise to them cease to exist. They have their own system of time, their own daily routines, even their own local customs, visiting certain houses at certain times, a practice passed from generation to generation, learned by each when it comes on its mother's back. The two worlds occupy the same space, but don't touch unless an individual inhabitant of one or the other wants them to.

The possums live near humans because they want to. From living in an area where possums are often dumped, Ingleside, I had already guessed what information I've had since confirmed. There were simply too many possums killed on the then dark strip of Mona Vale Road above the cemetery to be accounted for by seasonal migration alone. I and other local residents who travel that way regularly know that there is at least one killed every couple of weeks, usually more. Possums are dumped in the bush, and try to go to the house-lights down on the coast, pausing sometimes to eat the constant supply of edible litter kindly provided for them along the roadside. Possums who are used to living in or near houses try to go home, or failing that to another house. And are very often killed trying to do so.

They are true suburbanites, like the birds who come to be fed. They love trees, and bush, but they think there ought to be houses, too. Some unwillingly assimilate into bush conditions, though, particularly if they are female, they are strange possums to the locals, and treated accordingly; if they are male, one of their two overriding preoccupations to date has been how to persuade humans to provide delicious food, and they miss their creature comforts. It's rather like picking up a suburbanite human and dumping him or her in the wildest part of New Guinea.

If they have to be moved, they have to be. Moving them, with permission of the authorities - jail and/or fine otherwise - in accordance with the law, and above all to a place a long, long way from home and away from possum landmarks which would give them the direction (around here, for example, Pittwater and the sea broadcast visual, auditorial and olfactory signals for miles) - well, at least it gives them a chance. Possums love life, and are prepared to struggle for it even under adverse conditions.

Some, indeed, are lucky. If they are youngsters who have been accustomed to get only what the adults leave in terms of nests, food and females if applicable, and they happen to be dumped in a place suitable for possum, but where there are no adult rivals at the moment - such places are as rare as the proverbial hens' teeth - then they might even benefit from the change, but this depends entirely on what local possums are already in the neighbourhood.

But in 99 cases out of 100 you're not doing a suburbanite possum any favours by Returning it to Nature. Possums don't know anything about the distinction between Man and Nature. They know about the distinction

between good nests and bad nests, good food and better food, and those with any experience of people, effectively all of them, know that what they consider desirable `occurs naturally' in the vicinity of humans. That is now their natural habitat. The only way you can Return a suburbanite possum to Nature is to let it be.

Like the birds who come to be fed all over the district, they are free, and protected by law. They belong to no one but themselves, and they come and go as they please, or don't please, according to possum behaviour patterns. They decide which houses and which humans to approach, and once safe routes are established they rarely change them without reason, for obvious security considerations. I've lost count of the number of times I've been assured quite sincerely by people who've lived in the same house for years that there are no possums in the neighbourhood, when there's a group coming for food regularly a couple of doors away. Possums are very hard to see unless they let you see them. They come to you when they decide to trust you.

Some develop friendships with individual humans, something I'm going to talk about later; for obvious reasons, a possum who wants a friend has to bond with a non-possum. Many like humans in general, particularly male possums, who understandably find human company a welcome change from that of their trichosurine colleagues. When they come, they usually want a bite to eat, if you please, but that doesn't mean they don't like you as well. When they decide to trust you, they trust you implicitly.

They aren't owned pets, they are free, independent animals who make their own decisions, friends who drop in for a snack when they feel like it, who get an occasional helping hand when they need it, but for whom any sort of restriction of their movements without their consent is likely to prove unsuccessful, from the point of view of one party or the other.

The best thing you can do for a possum is, obviously, nothing at all; or, failing that, as little as possible. Unfortunately, however, the situation is not so straightforward.

If you feed them at all you are tampering with them, increasing the total possum food supply and allowing the establishment of routes. But the extra food supply must be balanced against the decrease in the natural vegetation due to clearing. If, as has the case to the best of my memory with almost every baby in the Newport groups, you field a fallen youngster and pass it back up to its mother, before a marauding cat or dog can anticipate her tricky descent from the top of the tree, you are tampering. You are removing the baby from a danger which it would otherwise run. But the danger, in the form of dogs and cats, was itself introduced by man; in areas where they are not so numerous, the chances of the baby surviving what is an extremely common mishap are much greater than they are in the suburbs. The possums were already there when the white man came, and they remain there because, whether we know it or not, we have introduced desirable as well as undesirable factors into their environment. If you don't feed them, they still remain, and still get fed, because they can scavenge in garbage tins along the roadside.

In any case, the `damage' has already been done. The first white settlers arrived in this district well over a hundred years ago, and that's how long possums have been living beside Europeans. Like every other surviving species, they evolve in response to changing ecological factors, and for over a hundred year they have been adapting to the white man and the changes he has brought. A hundred years is a hundred possum generations, say a thousand years, human time. It's a bit late now to start prating about unspoilt children of nature.

It's obviously a personal decision. Personally, I am inclined

to initiate no new contacts, but respond appropriately to any overtures the possums themselves make. In other words, just let 'em go on doing what they're doing, adapting, and see how far they get. But I give possums only about as much food as would amount to one of the short periods of browsing that characterize their nightly routine - a snack, not dinner for the night.

There are always exceptions, of course - a sick possum, or one that is having difficulty with a baby gets a bit extra, so it doesn't have to travel so far to feed, but it's not continued on a permanent basis, so that there is no possum dependent on me for more than a brief period. And they need their teeth, not only for eating but as their main weapons, so sweets, honey on bread and suchlike are a treat given a few times a year, not a regular occurrence.

Snoopy was an exception, a borderline case, too much of a possum to be caged, but still not capable of coping with the world entirely on her own account. There must be other such rare exceptions, and they must remain outside the law - there is no way I can see that the law could be altered to allow for them, without opening the door to abuses. And indeed, you cannot own a possum, not only in law but in fact: possums just aren't that sort of animal - although they can certainly own you, quite literally, according to possum law.

Sick Possums, Suggestions: Common sense just has to prevail. A sick or injured possum can't be left to suffer any more than any other animal, just because it is native fauna. But the best you can do is still the minimum you can do.

Minor afflictions are usually best dealt with by simply giving it the prescribed medicine in its handout - but I stress prescribed: possums are highly sensitive to human drugs of any kind, which are likely to kill them or do irreparable damage; even aspirin, for example, does far more harm than good. Even a possum that's immobilised is better given a small dark place safe from predators, and especially from other possums, in its own known territory, with a quick trip to the vet while it's dormant during the day if necessary, than it is removed to a veterinary hospital. But of course in the case of a road accident, or a bad dog attack, the reverse applies, and immediate veterinary treatment is needed.

If it needs to stay with the vet - by which time it is usually oblivious of its surroundings anyway - and it's a known local, make arrangements to return it to its own home, or at least a place familiar to it, as soon as possible. Again, when it comes back, the best you can do for it is to give it, or preferably let it `find', a small dark place somewhere familiar to it, but protected from other possums. Feed it twice a day, on the leaves it usually eats as well as the type of human food given as handouts, disturbing it as little as possible, petting it only if it's a particular possum that has previously liked handling, and can gain reassurance from it. Give it its medicine, and otherwise leave it alone. Always, the minimum amount of interference is best.

Don't, ridiculous as it may sound, be too scrupulous about removing all the soiled leaves. A possum doesn't normally foul its own nest, but one that is immobilised has no choice. Emotional factors are always paramount, and the sooner its present sleeping place smells of its own familiar personal smell, the better, and urine is a short cut to this situation. So leave a couple of soiled leaves, preferably the driest, and also unsoiled leaves, so that they dry out and build up into a warm, comfortable familiar-smelling bed. Once it feels at home - when it starts grooming naturally, and stretches out full length on its back to sleep - it will appreciate having the place cleaned up a bit, provided always that you

don't interfere too much with its personal privacy[j] and leave sufficient material to ensure the continuity of smell. The first emotional crisis will have passed.

In line with the security of the nest syndrome, the first thing it will want to do, once it can move at all, is to choose a safe nest for itself. They have a habit, of course, of picking on the most impossible place there is. But if by chance it does hit on a place where it can stay, even if it's not as good as the one first given it, again, it is better to abide by its decision. The point of the exercise is to find itself a place where it considers itself safe, from you among other things, so try to avoid letting it know you can actually reach it - put the food where it can get it and leave. Once the possum thinks it's in a safe place of its own choosing, the healing process can begin in earnest.

In the same way, a convalescent possum must leave before it is physically ready. It wants to go home. Furthermore, it has to - however comfortable its present situation, it has duties to perform. It thinks, not without justification, that if it doesn't keep its real nest and territory marked and patrolled, it will lose it to an intruder.

When it decides to go, it will become quite single-minded about it. If you don't let it go, it is likely to fret itself into a worse state, not to mention turning on you what, from its point of view, is a thoroughly justified attack. And a determined, dedicated possum can get out of almost anything - make a hole in a door, widen wire gauge, patiently undo a long series of blocking bricks. If you try to keep it, the chances are that after worsening its condition by fretting it will get out anyway.

When it decides to go, it can put on such a show of recovery and normality, for a short time, that it can, and will fool even a vet. It is in fact `back to normal' - but not for very long under stress conditions. You find this out only when you discover it lying exhausted on the ground a few nights later. But there is nothing you can do about it, other than recapture it for a time if necessary - your efforts have at least improved its chances, and it will have come to terms with its diminished physical capacity during the remainder of its convalescence.

It will therefore, of necessity, be loose among other possums before it is entirely competent to cope with their attacks, either by fighting or fleeing effectively, and before it can cope with any but known hazards avoided by habit. But the attacks of known neighbours are nothing compared with those of strangers, and the dangers in its own area are, for the most part, known and avoided.

The worst thing you can do for a sick or injured possum is to put it into a strange area of bush. If it hasn't a known home it just has to stay in confinement until it has totally recovered,

In short, all you can really do for a sick possum is to give it the best possible chance to make its own recovery.

Travel, tree roads

Just as their behaviour is partially modified to adapt to conditions as they find them, and hence in part a product of those conditions, it is also partially a product of their physical construction.

Basically, they have four paws, which can be four feet, two (front) hands and two feet, or four hands, depending on the circumstances of their use, and in trees they often have, in effect, five hands, since the

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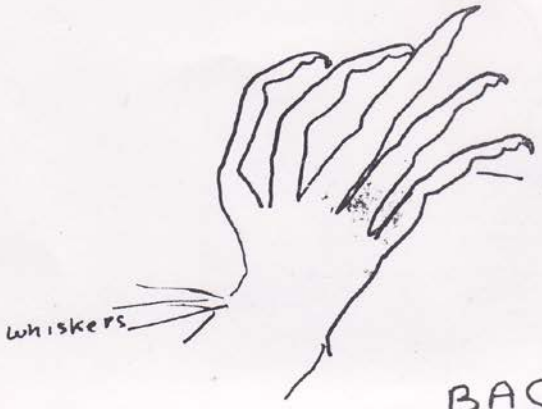
j. Any possum, sick or well, is likely to bite on reflex if disturbed in its nest without warning. Invalid possums are also no less cantankerous than invalid humans, and may bite even if not surprised. They `can't help it', any more than their human counterparts, so it's always advisable to be prepared and wear protective clothing such as thick leather gloves - at least with the possum invalids.

long, prehensile tail is used for securing an anchoring hold on the thinner branches.

The front hands look very much like human hands, with five fingers graduated in size, but there is in fact no opposable thumb there, despite the manual dexterity they display. The opposable thumb is actually on the hind hand, on the inside; next to it are two small conjoined `grooming claws', usually two phalanges in length, but otherwise miniatures of the two large fingers, with very large claws, on the outside of the hand, which oppose the thumb to provide a gripping action. The `grooming claws' are indeed used for grooming, being partially joined so as to form a natural, `built-in' comb, but the larger claws also play a part in grooming, and the `grooming claws', where necessary, help to secure a handhold when climbing; the front paws are used in the grooming process in much the same manner that a cat uses his forepaws, to wash the face.

FRONT FOOT

Used for walking, in the diagonal trot, or for balance when bounding, and for grasping when climbing, but otherwise as human hands, to pick up or hold food, etc. Used as a weapon only when boxing with equals, but also to hold escaping defeated opponents.



BACK FOOT

Hind legs provide main locomotive power, when climbing vertically or when bounding, the gait used for long distance ground travel, except over cleared spaces where diagonal gait used to remain low to the ground.

Back foot, with opposable thumb, used for grasping branches and for main hold on tree.

Large fingers with claws employed mainly for gripping, and small "grooming claws" for grooming – an inbuilt comb – but larger digits also play a role in grooming, while the "grooming claws" are also used as an additional anchor when climbing or maintaining hold.

Proportional size to larger fingers varies from possum to possum: these sketches were based on Bindi's l.h.s., and in her the disparity in size was unusually pronounced. In Snoopy, and others it was much less

Later injury in Snoopy. The model for the sketch was, however, Bindi, in whom the disparity in size between grooming claws and main digits was unusually marked.

Fig. 2

Bushy-tails are essentially arboreal animals, but they can, and often do, move quite well on the ground. They are lightning fast over a short distance, up to ten or fifteen feet. But for more than that distance they are no match for a dog - I once had the misfortune to see what happens; the possum made it to within a few feet of the nearest tree, and I'll never forget the scream. Possums know of this danger - there were dingoes before there were European dogs - and avoid travelling over cleared ground whenever possible. Instead, they establish routes through the trees and bushes, and, where available, fences and roofs, moving from one to the other, preferably where they touch or overlap, but jumping six feet or more where necessary.[k]

Although they climb very well - as well as many species of monkey - walking is easier still, and many like to do so where they feel it is safe. When they can, they prefer large trees with large branches along which they can walk, as opposed to climb, and roofs, where available, make a pleasant break in the route, where they can stretch out but still be safe. Some of those accustomed to handouts in particular places are quite happy to come along the ground and sit there eating as long as the presence of a known human guarantees safety.

There are two basic gaits on the ground: the diagonal walk, trot or scamper, used along possum tracks - tunnels about 12" height through dense undergrowth - and the kangaroo bound,[xi] used for longer distances and when maximum speed is required. In the latter, the power comes from the hind legs, and the front ones are used mainly only for balance, touching the ground only lightly, if at all, once travelling speed is attained.

For going up trees, essentially this same bounding action is used, but with the claws of all four hands, as they become in this situation, providing the necessary grip to secure the possum between bounds.

When moving along small branches they walk, gripping with all four hands at each step, like monkeys - climb, in fact. The long bushy tail is prehensile, with a furless strip along the underside to provide a better grip: it is used mainly to secure an extra hold in awkward positions, or to allow them to stretch out full length horizontally; they do, however, actually hang by their tails[l] where necessary, to capture with their front hands the tender choice young leaves which grow at the end of branches too small to support their weight. When feeding, whether on leaves or on human handouts, the front hands are used precisely as hands, save only for the lack of an opposable thumb.[xii]

The tree roads are dictated partially by these physical capabilities, partially by the topography, in possum terms. They are often

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k. Adults can jump horizontally, or at an upward angle, four to six feet or more, the males, for obvious reasons, covering greater distances than the apparently permanently pregnant females; jumping at a downward angle of course covers even greater distances. Neither male nor female adults can do much in the way of vertical levitation. But the light-boned babies of both genders go through a `grasshopper' stage in which they can shoot up vertically from the ground many times their own body length; through the trees they seem to have ambitions of growing into gliding possums.

l. For this reason, if a possum must be picked up, in a situation where no spinal injury is suspected, the most practical method is to pick it up by the tail, grasping the thicker part towards the body, and dangling it straight down so that there is no lateral torsion or twisting to put a strain on the junction with the body. Possums lack a convenient handle, such as the scruff of the neck in a dog or cat, and this is the nearest equivalent. It is no real substitute, since it does not induce an infantile reaction and quiescence, as does taking a cat by the scruff; the possum is likely to double back up its body and express its disapproval with its teeth. However, there is usually a few seconds' stunned grace, enough, say, to get a possum that has strayed into a house and started to panic in the light back outside where it belongs.

sinuous, tortuous, and to the human eye quite illogical, but if you watch possums following them, you'll see that in fact they are eminently suitable, the best way for a possum to go.

COMMUNICATIONS: calls, gestures and attitudes

Their communication methods, too, are a function of their physical capabilities.

There are three, perhaps four, basic calls. One is the hissing scream of anger or alarm. The main one, variously described as a bark, a cough or a chuckle, is the basic guttural kook-kook-kook. Fundamentally, it is a call of aggression, but there is a very great range of tonal variation, expressing mood, including, of course, affection - re-directed, or mock aggressive behaviour is used as an expression of affection in most species capable of such an emotion. I can pick up only the grosser variants - anger (with Quaa- kook-kook-kook for emphasis, as in, `Get-to-hell-out-of-here'), warning, alarm, the softer cajoling call of a courting male, the anxious call of another to a straying baby, the fussy little cluck which Snoopy, in particular, reserved for small passing non-possums such as mice, or small objects of no possum use which suddenly appeared in her house.

There is also a thin, piping, but woefully soft cry of a lost baby, like the cheeping of a little bird. I thought at first that this was the main call produced by tiny vocal organs, but Snoopy used it as an adult to call me if she were in distress, and I've heard two other adults, Erik and either Snug or Charon, use it in moments of crisis.

A separate call, less frequently used, is the slow, rhythmical clicking, very similar to the sound you make with your tongue against your teeth or the roof of your mouth (a dental, or alveolar, velaric suction stop in phonetic terms). I have heard this described as a mating call, and indeed thought it was a mating call myself for several years, since I'd only heard it made by a courting male, certainly its most frequent context. But I have also heard various females click, often to the accompaniment of tail-lashing, which indicates indecision or conflicting emotions or drives, and always in a situation where that appears to be their state of mind.[xiii] The basic meaning, therefore, seems to be the same as tail-lashing, though perhaps, since it is less frequent and only seems to occur when the possum is extremely agitated, it signifies a state of more violent emotional turmoil.

It is easy to see why the male almost invariably clicks when courting - he is torn between his desire for the lady and his well-grounded fear of what she will do to him if he continues to press his suit. Indeed, a courting male so frequently clicks that it doesn't seem improbable that it may have become a kind of *de facto* mating call: the female probably takes it as of a piece with the cooing and coaxing.

Because of the great deal of tonal variation which they employ I usually talk sense when talking to possums - not because I fondly believe that they understand the words themselves, but because the words have meaning for me, and produce the right tone in my own voice. Like all animals, they enjoy being babied at times, when they themselves are in the right mood, but even more than in domestic species, an adult is an adult, and too much of the diddums-do bit is an insult. And they show it quite clearly - with an expression of disgust on their faces, they firmly and deliberately turn their backs on you, and in the last analysis stalk off with extreme dignity.

They also communicate with each other by non-vocal, non-visual means of some description. I have seen, fairly frequently, a mother call a straying baby back by looking fixedly, and silently, at its retreating back. I presume this involves their sense of smell, which is in any case their

most important sense.

Whatever this soundless calling involves, I could, to a certain extent, do it too, with the two babies I reared. They often failed to come to my vocal call until I did, once they reached the stage of going out and coming back alone - then suddenly appeared out of nowhere. With Joey I could never be sure of this - it could simply have been coincidence, as I didn't get anxious until he was overdue, or heard trouble outside, circumstances under which he himself might well have decided to come home simultaneously. With Snoopy, who remained dependent on me for much longer, it seemed to happen too often, under unambiguous circumstances, for it to be no more than imagination; the noise which had alarmed me would turn out to be one of the normal nocturnal noises imperfectly heard, and she would have known it.

For me, this special sort of calling involved a state of anxiety associated with a particular physical reaction - the gnawing, knotted feeling in the pit of your stomach which gradually spreads upwards over your shoulders until you start shivering. I wouldn't be at all surprised if someone were to tell me that it's associated with a glandular reaction of some kind which produces a body scent, detectable to Snoopy and Joey, but not to me. When I did this, I almost always got my possum, I but I couldn't fake it. In the end, I could induce it by `method acting', but the method acting had to go to the point where I really meant it anyway. But however it works, its real, and has a real range limit; I always had to get fairly close, say within earshot, before I got results.

While it was evident that Joey and Snoopy could identify me from afar by smell, neither ever seemed to fully understand why I didn't know, by the same means, where they were. In time they both came to accept my disability to a certain extent, and learnt that only a close-hand visual acknowledgement would assuage my fears and persuade me to leave them to their own business. For mother possums do indeed know where their own babies are, even when they are invisible and noiseless. Some of my mother's friends at Newport, those of the Foxy line, learnt the human phrase (or rather sequence of sounds), `Where's your bub, Foxy/Sherry/Twiddy?' and if she insisted would finally point in a particular direction with their noses, from which, sooner or later, the tiny truant would come struggling through what, to it, was impenetrable jungle.

Possums also have a range of gestures and attitudes, `body language', which mean particular things. Most of them can be either involuntary expressions of feelings, or deliberately employed, vis-à-vis another possum or a human, to get the message across. Naturally, each individual possum, like each individual dog, cat or human, has its own personal `body language', signals peculiar to it, but some gestures and attitudes are common to all.

Many of them are unmistakable, some are not. Rearing up on the hind legs, arms above the shoulders, hissing and swearing and glaring, particularly with ears laid back, means, not surprisingly, intent to attack. Standing upright, ears pricked, without aggressive gestures, means alert - the possum wants a better look at something unfamiliar, and possibly dangerous. There are also conditional threats, warnings. A quick turn of the head, and a feint towards an attacker (supposed or otherwise) with mouth partially open, and the more ritualized version, a slow turning of the head and a movement of the snout towards the attacker, accompanied by a suspicious glare, both mean, `I'll bite you if you do that again.'

Their faces are capable of a range of expressions, their bodies even more so. Face, position of the ears and body together seldom leave much doubt as to their feelings. They can glare, show suspicion or fear,

beg, plead, enquire, express surprise, disgust or disappointment. Once you've seen enough possums so that you no longer see only a possum, a combination of unfamiliar characteristics, there is no mistaking the joyful scamper or bounce of a possum in fine form, or the delirious delight of a possum enjoying something Absolutely Delicious to eat, accompanied by lip-smacking noises, or the look of disappointment - the ears go down, the body droops, the eyes become sad, everything says, `Aw'.

There was no mistaking Snoopy's gestures of affection, either - sometimes she would kiss me, licking my face and hands with quick little licks, dabbing me with lightning wet dabs of nose and mouth, or snuffling in my ear; sometimes she would cuddle me, or as much of me as she could manage, a hand or foot or leg; sometimes she just wanted to sit beside me and hold my hand - she couldn't manage the whole hand, so she just took one finger and held it in her own hand; if no hand was available, she would simply sit against my legs, maintaining a light, constant physical contact, and go on with what she was doing, eating, grooming, meditating; or she would just sit at my feet, with one hand on my foot; if I visited her outside in one of her trees, she would come down to the lowest branch and sit beside me, one hand resting lightly on my shoulder.

Unlike dogs and cats, possums haven't had centuries of contact with humans to develop certain of their own basic actions - rubbing against legs, purring in anticipation, etc. - as begging gestures, recognised by both sides. But they do in fact similarly select the nearest appropriate gestures in their own repertoire for the purpose. Those which come along the ground to you use a version of the chest-rubbing action that normally denotes ownership. They rear up and embrace your leg - `You're mine - I love you - You will feed me, won't you?' The action is often incomplete once its meaning has become established, so that they simply stand up beside you, patting your leg with their hands or plucking at your trousers, to get your attention. The gesture is frequently accompanied by an audible sniff. The first question a possum asks about anything, once it is known to be safe, is, What does it smell like? Then, What does it taste like? So, `Nif, Nif, Nif, what do I smell?' - `Anything nice for me? '

At first I couldn't be sure whether this Nif, Nif, Nif business, and the lip-smacking noises they make when they are eating the very thing that is their own private concept of heaven at the moment, are ever attempts to communicate, or whether they are always just involuntary expressions of emotions. Both, of course, are in some sense optional: they can eat, and sniff, completely silently when they want to. Some certainly seem aware of the potential communication in the lip-smacking noises, at least in the negative sense: on several occasions I have seen weaker females who were wading noisily into some delicacy stop suddenly when they spotted a stronger possum in the vicinity, wait until they were sure it wasn't coming any closer, then resume eating, silently - there was no way in the world they were going to announce to the enemy that they had something Absolutely Delicious.

Snoopy certainly used the audible sniff to ask - a question, or for something - as was shown both in her reaction to my response, and by her use of it on occasions when what she could actually smell wasn't relevant to what she wanted. For example, on the floor, inside, she would use it to ask me to pick her up and take her for a walk, sniffing to me, not out the window or door. But Snoopy lived with me for 4½ years, and both of us developed gestures and sounds understood by the other, just as a dog owner and an intelligent dog have their own private `language', which, after several years, results in a fairly sophisticated system of communication.

However, Old Pig, at Newport, used the audible sniff to ask for

food, or a particular item of food, quite regularly, in unambiguous circumstances.[xiv] It therefore seems likely that when others appear to do so, in what are not quite such unequivocal contexts, they may in fact be deliberately trying to communicate their wishes.

The other standard begging gesture is used by those fed up trees (though of course possums in a group often chop and change from one to the other). This gesture consists of anchoring themselves by their tails and reaching out towards you, sometimes actually waving their hands to attract your attention. This is the position of a possum reaching for a particularly luscious tender young shoot or flower at the end of branches too small to bear its weight.

I was interested when Kylie, Snoopy's daughter, developed this gesture as an adult. At the time, she was just getting over the phase when she regarded me as Another Possum, to be bitten and evicted from the most desirable nest available, namely the house, and beginning to regard me simply as a human food-giver. Relations between us were not yet such that she could use the leg-rubbing gesture - physical contact with me still triggered off her biting reflex, and I wouldn't come that close to her.

Possums do in fact copy each other's behaviour when the actions in question are seen to produce a desirable result - at the most basic level, if one starts coming for food, others will watch, then start coming themselves. But Kylie had had no opportunity to take such lessons. Her contact with the Newport possums had been brief and traumatic, a couple of occasions when I took her there as an adolescent to see if there would be any chance of integrating her with the group. She was too busy running to study any non-aggressive actions on their part, even supposing her memory of such an observation could have lasted so long without the reinforcement of performing the action herself in the interim. She apparently independently chose the only applicable gesture in the possum repertoire other than leg-rubbing, which was precluded in her case.

The degree of politeness with which possums ask depends entirely upon the individual possum. Some, for example Foxy, Sally, Bindi and above all Snoopy, are unfailingly polite. They ask with a slightly apologetic air, `If you please, I don't want to bother you, but...' Others, for example Horrible and Kylie, usually just say, `Gimme!'

Scent trails and ownership chest-marks are, of course, also a form of communication - they contain a message for a possum, either the one who marks or an intruder, who is separated by time or distance, the same basic principle as writing.

Mostly these gestures, in their original context as opposed to being used to communicate with humans, seem wholly reflexive or `instinctual', although there certainly are occasions when they appear to be done with thought, deliberate intent, possum to possum.

NIGHTLY ROUTINE

A possum's nightly routine in the bush varies greatly with the possum and the conditions in which it finds itself. Generally speaking, when it wakes in its nest its first action is to orientate itself. It then grooms itself, and proceeds to peer, sniff, and listen out, to see what's lurking, before it ventures forth.

When it does so, it makes its way as quickly as possible to the first of its regular stops for food. After eating what it requires it settles down to meditate and view the surroundings for a while - ½ hour to 2 hours - before proceeding to the next feeding place. And so on.

In the process, a female checks, and where necessary re-marks, her territory, investigating anything new, particularly in the possum line, and a male similarly inspects that part of his territory, or range, through which he is travelling.

This pattern is broken up by whatever comes along, in terms of possum activity. A `normal' possum night is about as rare as a `normal' human day - there is always something different.

Ultimately, the female returns to her nest, and the male goes to whichever one of his he intends using the following day. Invariably, after checking the nest for signs of intruders, they groom - a more elaborate version of a cat's grooming process, involving biting out burrs and other foreign material, [m] combing or scratching with the grooming claws or the large hind claws (licking the claws clean at intervals), and interspersing combing with washing with the tongue; as with cats, the face is washed with the front paws, which they moisten from time to time with their tongues. A female pays a good deal of attention to cleaning her pouch, and anything that might happen to be in the pouch at the time; a male pays a lot of attention to cleaning his penis, which he erects for the purpose. Since all this involves complicated contortions, the main grooming sessions are generally reserved for the nest, with only the occasional scratching or washing in the trees during meditation. Grooming is a pleasurable activity to a possum, as well as a necessary one.

After grooming contentedly for a while, they finally go to sleep.

Their overall activity pattern is therefore explosive - short bursts of lightning quick motion, incredibly energetic, interspersed with long sedentary periods.

When they go to bed depends very much on such things as the weather, the time of year, and what happens during the night in terms of possum activity.

If there's a particularly delectable variety of seasonal vegetation available, they may stay out longer to do it full justice; on the other hand, if they run into trouble with a larger possum, or they detect the presence of a stranger who might prove a threat to their nest, they return earlier; if they are courting, they sometimes stay out until just after first light; and sometimes, when the weather is fine, the night is just so beautiful it's good to be alive, and out in it, and watching, and investigating, they stay out longer for no other reason.

But they also love comfort, too, and in bad weather often stay in bed, at least for the first night, and go out only as far as the nearest food source, to snatch a quick meal, if it continues the next night. Their coat is effectively waterproof for all but the heaviest downpour, but they are far too sensible to spend more time than necessary in cold, damp, uncomfortable conditions. Sleeping in warmth and comfort with wind howling and the rain pelting down outside can be a positive activity, too.

Furthermore such weather conditions are dangerous. The sound and scent of approaching predators is undetectable.

During the day, they sleep. Once asleep they are completely

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m. They don't, incidentally, often pick up parasites other than `possum ticks', the less deadly variety of ticks, to which they are of course immune. Snoopy, who went outside regularly, and slept on my bed for four and a half years, never got anything apart from the occasional tick. On one occasion one of the cats went out and rolled in the sand, came back with a coat full of fleas, and sneaked on to the bed, where, no doubt discouraged by the Malawash on the cat, the fleas promptly decamped. I was scratching for days, and desperately fumigating the bed; Snoopy, with what I would have thought was a far more inviting coat of fur, never even got one.

Trying to remove ticks from possums usually does more harm than good - whenever I've yielded to the temptation the bite has festered, whereas if the tick is left to fall out itself, or to be removed by the possum at its own discretion, there are no after-effects.

relaxed - dead to the world. There is nothing more relaxed, and prone to induce relaxation, than a contentedly sleeping possum - if you think a sleeping kitten curled up purring on a bed is soporific, you should see a possum under the same circumstances. All possums are two possums; the angelic sleeper of the daytime, and the very wide-awake and active little monkey of the night.

Most of those in the two roofs with which I've had experience, at Newport and Ingleside, do stir at some time during the day. They groom a little, and perhaps change their location to another a few feet away.

Snoopy did likewise, though because of her facilities, she made use of her short diurnal activity period to slide off the bed and have a snack, returning either to her former position or to the alternative nest under the bed. Sometimes possums, particularly breeding females, bring small amounts of leaves into their nests, usually of an edible variety. Whether they, too, eat them as a midday snack, or whether it's merely a vestigial nest-building reflex, I don't know. Since both leaves and bedding were provided for Snoopy inside, she had no need to do this in either case. She only brought a leaf in once - on the momentous occasion when, as a pathetically weak baby, she made her first independent trip, a few feet outside the window. On that occasion it was definitely her dinner that she brought back.

FEEDING PATTERNS

Possums who are lucky enough to have the opportunity include calls on food houses in their routine, in exactly the same way as they include stops at particular trees where they are in the habit of browsing. Some identifiable individuals I heard of while looking for Snoopy seem to have had five or six houses lined up as points of call, and so relied heavily on human food as their basic diet. So, in a sense, Snoopy and her Ingleside associates were more `natural' possums than some other suburbanites: even Snoopy herself, of her own choice, always took the bulk of her food from the natural vegetation.

What this actually means is that some possums have adapted more thoroughly to some suburban conditions than others. In so doing, they retain the protection of innate feeding patterns evolved for bush conditions.

Unless a particular delicacy is in very limited supply, as with human handouts, or unless food in general is so scarce that they would otherwise starve, possums won't eat all of anything.[n] They take a little from here, and a little from there, a pattern reflected on a larger scale by their nightly routine, moving from tree to tree, from food source to food source.

There is obvious ecological reason for this feeding-pattern - the survival of all varieties of vegetation eaten by possums, to the long term benefit of both. For the possums there are even more important short-term implications: they are never dependent upon one single source of supply, which leaves them to starve if it fails.

The ecological situation is made even better by another factor. Possums are very faddy, with idiosyncratic tastes. At Ingleside there is a wide range of edible vegetation. Nevertheless, leaves which Snoopy preferred, even some which she said, with eloquent lip-smacking noises, were Absolutely Delicious, were treated with disdain by the others who were on my

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n. For this reason I always had to supply those dependent on me for food - Snoopy, Kylie and Joey as young babies, and assorted invalids - with more food, human, but especially leaves, than they were actually going to eat. At Ingleside, the leftover leaves provided a useful supply of kindling for the copper, and the remainder were `recycled' by dumping them back in the bush, where they quickly broke down.

hands briefly, as invalids, and vice versa. Erik, for example, considered that common wattle was Absolutely Delicious, but Snoopy wouldn't touch it - not the flowers, not the leaves, not any part of it. There are about six edible varieties of eucalypt there, and the same situation obtained - some possums were crazy about one sort, others thought it was just all right, and went mad over another sort the first didn't think much of.

The distinction is carried even to parts of the same sort of tree - some will eat the flowers, others only the leaves - and even to the leaves of the same tree at different stages in their development, some preferring tender young tips, others the coarser mature leaves with their more pungent flavour.

Yet the whole range is edible. When an invalid first arrived, I supplied Snoopy's basic selection, and it was eaten, until the possum in question made its own current fads known to me. The same was true, with knobs on, as they say, with the human food supplied.

And `current' is very much the operative word. I must have spent a small fortune keeping up with Snoopy's fads. As soon as she persuaded me, by repeated appreciation and asking for more, to buy a large quantity of something, she would suddenly go off it entirely. As likely as not none of the others would want it at the time - only to develop an uncontrollable craving for it when it had nearly run out.

All this dietary delinquency, of course, reduces still further the chance of any natural food sources ever being eaten out, since it reduces the number of possums likely to be feeding on any particular part of any particular plant at any particular time.

Possums are essentially vegetarians, though they do, on occasion, eat meat, and catch and eat insects. Those I've reared would find the first two bits of meat Absolutely Delicious, but refuse the next. As always, a little of something is good, but not too much. Faddy as ever, it was some meats, not others. Snoopy was very partial to lamb, chicken and ham, but would rarely touch beef. None I've tried would ever accept fish.

Their small-time predatory activities were made known to me in a dramatic fashion by Joey, then in his most playful stage.

A big hairy spider, of the sort usually called Daddy Longlegs, had taken up residence in my room before Joey arrived. I don't like insects - or for that matter arachnids - quite frankly they give me the creeps. But this was a harmless, if unpleasant-looking character. It didn't build inordinate webs, and it disposed of stray mosquitoes and flies. So I decided to live and let live - or die. At night it sometimes wandered down the window in search of food, and one night I heard a loud bang on the flyscreen, and turned to see Joey eating something hairy, with a lot of legs. I didn't investigate too closely, but the Daddy Longlegs never reappeared.

I've no doubt that their occasional fondness for insects gets possums into unnecessary trouble with humans. I had a graphic illustration of just what mistakes can occur. One of the trees at Newport, one frequented by Snoopy as an adolescent, was stripped by caterpillar larvae. I went out one night to find Snoopy wading into the few remaining leaves with gusto, obviously in the process of finishing the stripping of the tree. Snoopy was Snoopy, so I went to take a closer look. Only when my head was actually against her side could I see that what she was eating with such relish was not in fact the leaves, but the larvae which were doing the damage.

3. Joey.

I didn't, of course, know a word of this when Joey first arrived.

Apart from having vague ideas about gum leaves, I didn't even know what he was supposed to eat. It was, however, pretty obvious that a baby that size ought to be on milk. For want of anything better I tried warm cow's milk,[o] with a little sugar dissolved in it, so that the attraction was enough to offset the unfamiliarity. It worked, so it's what I've used ever since.

At first we tried giving it to him by soaking bread in it, in the hope that he would suckle. That didn't work, so in the absence of the traditional eye-dropper I simply spooned it in to him, drop at a time. On vague analogies with human babies, I gave him a little every couple of hours for the first few days (and nights).

By the second day he himself was starting to lap from the spoon, so I started giving it to him in an egg-cup, and he never looked back from there.

It was his great good fortune that, once he stopped dying of being lost, he was an extremely healthy, robust little possum, able to overcome any well-intentioned blunders on my part.

Once I realised the principle that he ought to be in constant physical contact with his `mother', I acted accordingly. He should still have been in the pouch for at least half the time. I didn't have one of those, so putting him under my jumper was the best I could do, and it turned out to be better than I knew.

I later knitted him a mohair sleeping bag, under the misapprehension that his mother's pouch was fur-lined. He did in fact come to accept it as his part-time mother. I shall never forget his look of dismay and horror one night when I tactlessly washed it and wrung it dry in front of him. He tried to snatch it away from me, and cuddled it desperately - I was wringing his mother's neck. In actuality, the first thought was best: the pouch is in fact hairless inside, and under my jumper, pressed against my skin, was a pretty good facsimile.

On about the third day he was on my lap while I was having lunch. I was eating a piece of bread. While showing his appreciation of his milk in the usual possum manner, he was, until then, always polite, his movements gentle and controlled. On this occasion, however, he suddenly went berserk.

The possum was asleep, but the nose smelt the bread, and went to it; the possum, being attached to the nose, perforce followed, and in a few seconds I had a pair of tiny frantic hands trying to open my mouth and take the bread out. Must Have, Absolutely Must Have. It was a complete contrast to all his previous behaviour, and totally unprecedented. Since then the only time I've seen that reaction, other than in possums, is in a certain cat who goes berserk in the presence of fish.

I was very dubious about giving him what he wanted, and canvassed the opinion of all present. Something which as yet does not have teeth has no business with bread, in my book. Nevertheless, he insisted, so I gave him a tiny piece to try. He gobbled it in ecstasy, and with not the slightest difficulty, so I gave him a slightly larger piece, about an inch square. He disposed of that with equal alacrity.

I took the hint, and decided it was time to put him on to

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o. Potentially fatal in the case of other species. See Note 1.

solids. The bread did him no harm whatsoever, so the principle was established. I let him decide whether he was supposed to eat something or not - after all, he was the possum, not I. He was a baby possum, and so likely to make mistakes at times, but I was no sort of possum, and even more likely to make mistakes. To the best of my memory, his judgment never erred.

I found his tastes in fruit and vegetables by the simple process of offering them to him and seeing what he preferred. For leaves I initially tried gum leaves: the gums are dying out in this part of Newport, but at that stage there was still a good supply. I was lucky enough to hit on one of the sorts which possums eat for preference; the one people usually offer them first, the big smooth-barked angophora or red gum (the one with khaki green leaves veined with red) in which most holes suitable for possum nests occur, is edible but not particularly desirable; most possums eat only very young shoots and leaves. For the rest, I picked up clues from Joey himself when he was outside, and from the other possums when I saw them browsing. I didn't in fact need to bring many leaves inside for Joey, as he was very soon capable of supplying that part of his diet himself.

There are quite a lot of native trees and shrubs, of which I don't know the name, on the menu. One in particular somewhat resembles pittosporum, but isn't pittosporum - a weakling subject to rot, disease, and hence storms, and so in short supply, is highly prized by many possums. The main staples at Newport were casuarina (she-oak), of which they particularly favour the seeds and nodules in the leaves, cedar wattle when in flower, similarly the flowers of the cabbage tree palms (*corifa australis*), occasionally banksia, cheese tree (glycidion), probably alphitonia, and of, course, ficus coronata, sandpaper fig, almost the signature of the coastal rainforest patches from Sydney to Newcastle and a staple for all wildlife.

And, surprisingly enough, multi-coloured lantana. This is an imported weed, branded as noxious, and no doubt in excessive quantity it does, as it is supposed to do, ruin the bush. In small patches, however - say 10 ft. by 10 ft. - it has proved beneficial to the remaining wildlife in marginal suburban areas. Some of the species which survive do so because they have adapted to it.

Small birds, native rats and mice, and ring-tail possums make their nests in it. Larger possums use it as part of their tree-roads, and as a refuge in times of crisis, as do bandicoots: it's thick enough, and prickly enough, to deter the imported predators, while creating no difficulties for the locals, who are designed to travel through hakea and suchlike horrors, and the fact that lantana harbours ticks is particularly effective as a deterrent against human predators. Well-intentioned people have a habit of taking it out *in toto*, without first gradually introducing a substitute, leaving only bare ground - then wonder where the wildlife went. It's probably dead; nothing lives on nothing.

It is supposed to be poisonous - I myself am mildly allergic to it, and a scratch from a lantana bush is always likely to prove troublesome, so I've no reason to doubt that it is poisonous to human beings. Possums will not, in fact, touch the monochrome domesticated variety, beyond a couple of exploratory nibbles.

However, some of them certainly do eat the wild kind, often with relish - I can only suggest you ask a possum living in an area where it occurs. If it's poisonous to them, then it's one of those poisons like arsenic, which, if taken in small quantities from infancy, build up an immunity in the system of the animal in question. If the taste relates to the smell when they are munching it in the same way that that of gum leaves does - I've never been silly enough to try the same experiment with lantana

- then it is sweet. It is particularly beloved by young possums. Candy for the kids.

Joey made his own changes in the sleeping arrangement, too. My first thought was to put him in a box beside the bed. He cried and pleaded miserably, so I dangled a hand into the box and he went to sleep cuddling it. After a couple of nights, however, he simply waited till I was near enough to asleep, walked up the arm attached to the hand, and installed himself where he wanted to be: next to me.

I didn't actually want him in the bed - apart from sanitary considerations, I was worried that I might roll on him and suffocate him or squash him. But Joey, being nocturnal, had the advantage over me. He just waited until I was asleep, then re-arranged matters according to his own lights.

Finally I managed a compromise, leaving the bedcover so that he wouldn't be exposed to the light, and putting him under it, above the tucked-in bedclothes, giving him an arm for company. That way I couldn't roll on top of him. That arrangement lasted for a little while, but little possums grow very quickly, and it wasn't long before he was awake for considerable periods when I was asleep. And put himself to bed when he chose, where he chose - in the bed,

In fact the dangers involved in my rolling on him were fairly minimal - something designed to be in its mother's pouch while she squeezes through an opening two or three inches high is fairly unsquashable, and capable of worming its own way out of difficulties if it finds itself short of air.

I'd got one of those animals-in-captivity things, so as soon as Joey was moving around under his own power, I started to leave the window open. The window proved a great attraction: like cats and dogs who prefer to lie in doorways, Joey thought it was a very good place to be; he could see out and smell out, and make short expeditions up the window frame, but always had a safe retreat close behind him.

A week after he arrived, he disappeared while I was asleep.

I was pretty sure the Jenny was his mother, and she had been calling in every couple of nights for a bite to eat. It seemed possible that she had taken him back. But at that stage I didn't know where to find Jenny, unless she herself appeared at my window, and it was just as likely that he'd strayed too far himself.

I was frantic with worry and searched for him everywhere I could think of. There was, of course, no sign of him during the day. I went all round the place the next night, calling him. He'd already seemed to show signs of `answering' to Joe-Poss, though I couldn't be sure, but for lack of anything better, that's what I called. Finally I arrived back at the tree near the house, beneath which he'd made his first appearance. Nothing was to be seen.

I waited and called, and after a few minutes four and a half inches of baby possum came creeping down the tree trunk, down my arm and on to my shoulder.

Whosever baby he had been before, Joey was sure he was my baby now. I don't know whether or not it's significant, but when he first arrived his eyes were not properly developed. He was blind. After a couple of days his pupils developed, though his vision wasn't completely co-ordinated, and I had to be very careful to keep him out of bright light, except for short periods. By the time he disappeared he'd become thoroughly accustomed to my smell, and I was the first mother he actually saw.

`HOW TO TELL

After that I started trying to find out about possums in earnest. Although I suspected, I wasn't in fact sure that he was a he.

There was no penis visible - actually it's internal, like that of a cat, when not in use - but there was a little white hairless heart-shaped sac underneath, higher on his body than the testicles of a cat, about where you'd expect his navel, if he had one. In my current state of knowledge, while I suspected it was a testicle sac, it could have been anything from a pouch to a malignant growth. So I rang the Australian Museum and got on to a very helpful gentleman (whose name, unfortunately, I didn't catch), and he set me straight.

In fact, once you know what to look for, it's very easy to tell a male from a female if you get a close view, but for a distant view there are only pointers.

Males tend to develop red patches on the shoulders and between the shoulder blades from the time they are about seven months old, conspicuous by the time they are about two. These spread still further as they get older.

But possums vary greatly in colouration. All are light coloured, ranging from golden cream through dirty brownish or greyish cream to silvery white underneath, with the vertical brown stripe from the chest scent gland developed to a greater or lesser extent according to the possum. The main colour is given by the coat on the dorsal side, which combines both woolly fur and hair, and this varies markedly: even in the small pocket at Newport, there were: those with dark grey, silvery tipped fur, with contrasting black face markings, belonging to the Jenny-poss line; the russet toned creek possums, with their lovely golden babies, Foxy's people; the very light, pale grey of Sally's long-snouted family; and the light, almost cream coloured possums with snub features, like Mrs. Poss's attendant male, Grandpa.[p]

The red patches, even when small, show up very well on a male of the Jenny-poss line, but tend to get lost in the general redness of Foxy's mob. And possums do vary their colour slightly from time to time, perhaps the effects of seasonal food, perhaps from hormonal activity. Females, too, sometimes develop gingery patches, particularly on the forearms, near the wrist with their `cats whiskers'.

Moreover, possums come in big and small - size, particularly of feet and hands, is something of a guide to age, but unless you know whether the possum in question is intended by nature to be a large possum or small possum you can't be sure. In females, the pouch is simply a slit in the skin, invisible under the fur, until it becomes distended by the presence of a baby.

The upshot of all this is that a smallish grey possum in the distance could be either a small adult female or a yearling male.

Movements can also be a guide. The males retain a lot of their baby agility, which the females, hampered by babies, lose, and many males also retain their love of gymnastics for their own sake. They also tend to sit in positions which would be uncomfortable for females with their pouches distended, and which older females, therefore, by habit tend to avoid. But again an agile young adult female, who has had only, say, one baby, or none at all, can perform in the same manner as a male.

Behaviour, particularly towards humans, can also serve as a

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p. Indeed at one stage in later years a near albino male, Spectre a full-grown adult, totally white except for a few black spots, like a Dalmatian's, did appear in the area and stay for several weeks - the extreme caution which had allowed him to survive babyhood still applied, and despite the fact that you ought to have been able to spot him a hundred yards away he was as invisible as the rest, except when he wanted to attract attention.

guide. While baby males tend to be more timid than baby females, adult males seem more prone than females to venture out before it is properly dark, and more forward in their approaches to humans. They have to be. A fairly common house-feed situation is for the male to come first, get his share, then hastily retire to a respectful distance when Madam appears. If he wants his quota of goodies, he can't afford to be too diffident with humans, and when he moves on to the next place he carries with him the lesson already learned. Even if the same situation does not apply there, it comes in handy for cadging an extra share. But who comes first really depends more on who lives closest than on gender. And plenty of females are also willing to come out a little before dark, and make confident approaches to humans.

To make matters worse, in youngsters the undeveloped sexual organs are very often hidden by the fur, even on close inspection. But with adults, one good look at the underside leaves you in no doubt. An adult male is as well developed for his size as a prize pedigreed bull.

JOEY'S CHILD-HOOD

Until Joey's advent, I had always considered possums as mindless, indistinguishable balls of fluff - pretty things, which made a nuisance of themselves at times, but for the most part just didn't count. Probably about as intelligent as birds, certainly not in the same range as dogs and cats.

Ability of even babies to reason short hypo-thetical causal sequences: `If I go there, then I can go there, then I can go there.'

I couldn't have been further from the truth, as Joey soon demonstrated. This isn't the place for Joey anecdotes, but there is one, I think, which might serve the purpose and interest the experts.

Joey at this stage was still, in human terms, a toddler, but insatiably curious and adventurous, and one night, after playing on the window frame, scrambled up on to the roof. Had I known more about possums I might have predicted it - babies are always at risk from cats and owls, but on the whole a roof is a fairly safe place to play. Ours is used for that purpose by youngsters and adults alike. But I didn't know.

I heard Joey go, he made a bee-line for the centre of the roof. I hung out the window and called him. He once again made a bee-line, but this time to a nearby projecting part of the roof, the only place from which he could see me directly.

He tried, as baby instinct dictates, to come straight towards me, but met with empty air, and the jump was far too long for him at that stage. He grew very distressed, calling me frantically, and grew just as distressed, calling him. Once he'd seen me, I didn't dare go away to get a stick long enough to reach him, so he could climb down it, in case he panicked and ran off the wrong way.

Quite suddenly, he stopped crying, turned, and deliberately trotted away from me, out of sight, back along the roof on a kind of jagged hypotenuse to his triangle, to a point immediately over my head, then leant down over the overhang, where I could touch him with my hand, and came back down my arm to my shoulder.

There was no way he could have known this route home, other than to reason the situation out for himself. There was no regular possum route along that part of the roof at that time, and his own scent trail, supposing he had been old enough to lay one, was at an angle to his route back. He must actually have though in a short causal sequence: `If I go there, then I can go there, then I can go there.'[xv]

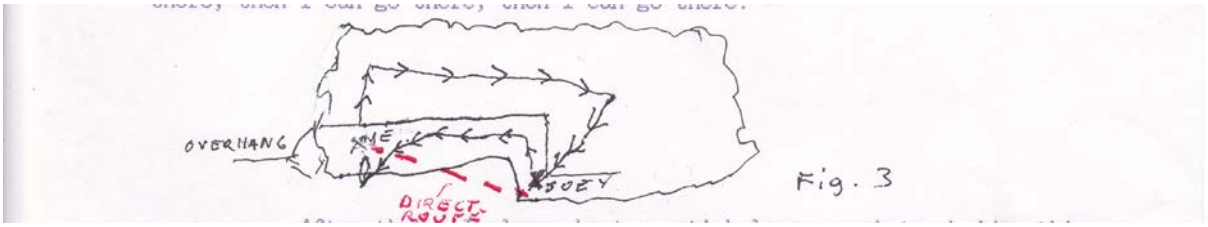

Fig. 3

After that, I always kept a stick long enough to bridge this gap handy, and he had no qualms about climbing down it, then down my arm and on to my shoulder, when he wanted to come in.

I found out later that Joey was by no means exceptional - he was bright, as he had to be to survive my blunders. But possums generally are quite capable or working out long concatenate chains of actions, particularly those involving manual dexterity or locomotion, to get what or where they want. Though how this could be demonstrated under laboratory conditions, I can't see.

I well remember a fellow undergraduate, who was working with possums, complaining, `But all they do is sleep.' I've no doubt that that is precisely what any possum, pragmatists that they are, would do if caught and caged. If it was one that was doing well in its own world, it would, once it found it couldn't escape, fret, and, because there is no other behaviour pattern for it to follow - it hasn't the space to do so - finally curl up and take refuge in sleep in despair. If it was one that had been having a hard time, it would think all its Christmases had come at once - a good safe place, with food provided - it would go blissfully to sleep in relief, for sleeping in comfort is a positive activity with a possum. The only sort of possum who'd perform under such conditions would be a youngster, particularly a male, used to showing off to humans for applause and food. Who would therefore be `a-typical' anyway.

GAMES

Joey certainly `performed'. Inside and outdoors he invented game after game, each designed for the particular physical circumstances under which it was played - the particular tree, particular branch, the bed, under the bed, the window, the window ledge, the door-posts, the wardrobe, etc., etc., etc. I hadn't the foggiest notion what sort of games little possums were supposed to play, so I let him invent his own, and joined in where it seemed appropriate.

The games he invented were pretty much the same as those played by kids of any kind - preparation, so they say, for adult activities.

Outside, it was chasings, tipped-you-last. He'd come racing down the tree to me, I'd touch him lightly, and he'd take off, only to come racing back to me, to touch or be touched, and take off again.

That one developed out of my taking him out and putting him in a low tree, later sending him up one under his own steam. He'd go up the tree and come straight back to me as soon as I called him, extending my arm up the trunk so he could walk down on to my shoulder. But it wasn't long before I wanted to go back inside before he wanted to come down, and called him before he was ready; and it wasn't long before he was making short expeditions of his own, only a few inches at first, then becoming frightened and running back to Mummy to be reassured and recover his confidence, then go again. With both working together, the pattern developed, racing away from me, then racing back again to formally fulfil the requirements of duty and safety by a tiny touch, then off again.

Once the pattern was established, however, it became, quite

simply, a game - played for the love of it, with totally unnecessary and extravagant movements, unwarranted gymnastics for grace notes, variations developed for pure enjoyment. The finished product, the game of chasings, also presages adult activity: possums, particularly males, are forever being chased away from something desirable, usually choice food, which they can only catch in the end by lightning expeditions.

There was one particular situation in which he loved to play this game most - a treefern, bent over nearly at right angles, so that when I stood beside it I, the treefern and the ground formed the letter `D'. I'd used it as a trainer for his first tottering steps, because it was conveniently at shoulder height. Later Joey would race around the `D', up the treefern, down its slope, on to my shoulder, down me, across the ground, up the treefern, faster and faster until he barely touched the surface, skimming lightly over it, in places actually flying, taking off from half way down the slope of the treefern, barely touching me and glancing off, sometimes not even hitting the ground before landing back half way up the treefern again. Or, for the sake of variation, he'd go the other way, up me, up the treefern slope, down the trunk, up me.

As his speed increased towards the point where he became airborne, so did his excitement and his involvement with his own game. By the time he was actually flying in a circle, touching at only two, no more than three points, he was completely immersed in his own world. One night the inevitable happened.

One of his hind feet caught me across the face as he flew past - I shut my eyes reflexively, and his two big hind claws cut me across the eyelid and under the eye. That happens to be a part of the human anatomy which bleeds like the proverbial stuck pig at the slightest provocation. There was blood everywhere, and I was terrified by what had nearly happened.

Joey was horrified, he nearly died of remorse. He licked me, and pleaded with me to be all right, and did everything he could possibly do to undo his crime. What’s more, I, who was supposed to protect him from harm, was now injured and so his protector was unable to protect him. He was so deeply, and so desperately distressed, that in the end it was I who had to comfort him.

He also played other games - war games, exploration and gymnastics on the window inside, hide-and-seek, gymnastics in the trees outside. Hide-and-seek also developed from `real' to a game, the final form of which foreshadowed adult activity: incidents where I temporarily lost track of him and had to look for him became ritualized into a game, with Joey disappearing completely into the foliage and me trying to spot him. If I didn't spot him he would eventually re-appear aloft, dangling and waving his hands to attract my attention, `Yoo-hoo! Here I am! Fooled you!'

One other activity, in particular, which started by his seeing the potential in a happy accident, ultimately became a game which foreshadowed a useful adult skill. He discovered that pliant, resilient stemmed plants such as raphis palms moved horizontally as well as vertically as he moved his weight from bottom to top, and so could be turned into a temporary bridge across a gap where no such connection normally existed.[xvi]

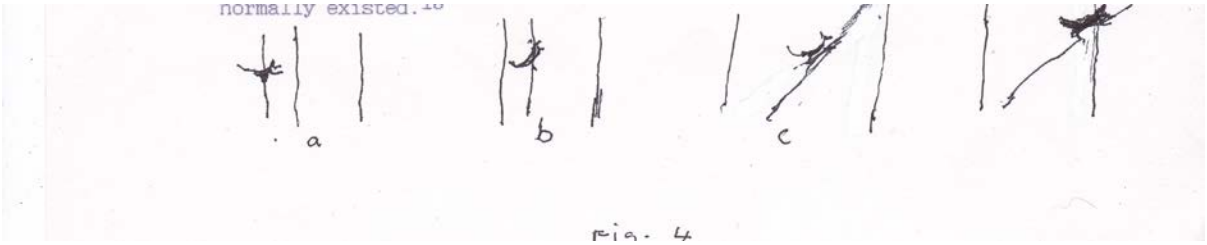

Fig. 4

DEVELOPMENT At first I'd simply send him up a tree near the house, let him play or play with him as the case might be, and wait until first I, then later he, decided he'd had enough for the night. As he grew older, however, he became more reluctant to come when I called, and more prone to make his own decision on the matter: he'd make a feint down the tree and touch me, ritually fulfilling his duty to come to my call, then shoot back up the tree before I could collar him. In the beginning, he confined his activities to the tree I put him in, but then he started to explore the tree roads to adjacent trees, which was how I first learnt about them.

In due course I got a bit sick of freezing my backside on the cold, cold ground for up to four hours a night, first under one tree, then under the next, until Master Joey had finished the business he had evolved for each and every one of them. Joey was a very capable little fellow. There wasn't actually very much I could do if he ran into trouble with Another Possum, twenty feet up a tree, in any case, except try to mitigate the attack by distracting the stranger with a torch, and trying to lure it away with food. Joey's own mother would have intervened with force, I could only use bribery.

Now that worked very well as long as he was near the ground. The Other Possum was quite happy to be bribed - one ill-mannered youngster who needed to be put in his place was just another one of many. The attack wasn't serious, and a chance at a bit extra to eat was far more interesting. And Joey needed no `lessons' to get the idea. As soon as the Other Possum started to come towards me, he'd extricate himself from the position he was in and go to a branch where he could reach my outstretched arm and be collected while the stranger was busy eating. Later, when the attacks were becoming a little more serious, he'd shoot off into the bushes as soon as the Other Possum's attention was distracted, and stay hidden, from me as well as everything else, until after the stranger had finished eating and departed.

But when the exchange took place high in the air, the technique didn't work. The lure of the food was not so immediate to the stranger - it would have to come a long way with some effort to get it, so it would finish its immediate business first, namely the chastisement of the youngster.

And I began to realise that such attacks were not, in fact, as murderous as they appeared, and that Joey was becoming expert at extricating himself from difficulties. They were in any case rare, the product of chance encounters, once I knew, and Joey knew, which trees the others favoured, and avoided them. I cannot overstress the fact that possums are <u>solitary</u> by nature. They were interested in the baby only when he was in my room, getting treatment they considered desirable. That was a situation to be investigated, to see how they might get in on the act themselves. But a baby at a respectful distance in a commonplace tree had no such promising significance.

Given all this, I began sending him up a tree near the house, staying with him till he settled in, then going back inside. He was within earshot, so that I would be bound to hear any real trouble, and could race

out and interfere to the best of my ability. So I got into the habit of parking him in a tree by himself, for half an hour or so, then going out to get him.

At first he was always in the same tree when I came back, but very soon he again started moving to adjacent ones. And when I went out for him, he was nowhere to be seen. At first he'd come almost as soon as I called, waiting only long enough to make sure that there was no danger I hadn't noticed - we both soon learnt by experience that he could spot things far better than I. Gradually, however, he took longer and longer to show up, then suddenly, after an hour or so, appeared high up in the tree where he'd been hiding motionless in the foliage all along, as pleased as Punch with himself, dangling and Yoo-hooing. He seemed to think that it was part of the game. Whereupon I would sit down and keep track of him, by ear or eye, until his lordship did deign to come down. The ability to hide, for hours if need be, is another prime prerequisite for an adult male.

In time, this arrangement developed into taking him out, leaving him, and coming back to check every so often to see that he was all right and whether he wanted to come in, then leaving him again till later. Gradually, it became clear that he was all right, except for thoroughly noisy emergencies. He spent longer and longer alone, till my visits, which were welcome at first, and then quite obviously started to be a nuisance, finally became rare treats. Then he would proudly show me what he'd found in the meantime, what new gymnastics he'd managed to invent for which combination of branches - his achievements, in fact.

I had always taken him round the nearby trees on my shoulder, letting him investigate them, sniffing the trails of other possums, going up them if he wanted to, to get his bearings before parking him for the night. On one occasion we met one of the russet-coloured creek possums in a small tree near the cedar wattle, and she had with her a youngster Joey's own age. I thought it would be a good idea to give him a playmate - whatever I could do in that respect would hardly be as good as one of his own kind, a real live possum to play with. So I sent him up the tree where the youngster - Foxy? - was already playing.

They took no notice of each other whatsoever. Each happily played its own game with the tree. The mother watched suspiciously from a short distance away.

I left them together, keeping a watchful eye on proceedings, and eventually Joey finished his game and came back to me. I thought perhaps they were just shy, and moved him closer to the other youngster, and so closer to its mother. When he got too close, the mother repelled him - quite mildly, in fact, but to both our inexperienced ears it sounded as if murder was intended, and we beat a hasty retreat.

One night after I parked him in the trees near the house, he vanished altogether. By this time I knew that the comparatively huge cedar wattle was a favourite possum place, so when all else failed, I tried there. Sure enough, down came my possum. Thereafter it became his favourite tree, and, if he were chased, or explored further, he'd come back to it to meet me.

It was in fact the best thing he could have done. Up to that point, I could, in the last analysis, have reached him with a ladder in a real crisis. But the cedar wattle was forty feet tall, nothing in terms of the Ingleside trees but a pretty fair size for Newport ones. The `instinctive' direction for safety for a possum is up, and Joey was obeying this `instinct' by finding himself the biggest tree he could and going right to the very top. As I don't happen to have a tame fire-engine, this move effectively put him beyond my control. It marked a crucial point in his

development.

Half a dozen possums could have disappeared into that tree without any sign of their presence, and two or three often did. While Joey could learn certain of the necessary lessons about how to be a possum while still under my protection, there are other important things, matters of `etiquette', which are not innate and can be learnt only the hard way, from Other Possums.

All I could do under the new circumstances was to sit anxiously under the tree and watch, till dawn if necessary, and collect the body when it came tumbling down. In time I got to know that tree, by sight, but more importantly by ear, almost as well as he did, and after a while I could follow his movements, and those of any others present, unless they made a deliberate effort to conceal their presence.

Joey learnt very quickly. At first he regularly came hurtling down through the air from the tree-top, but he soon learnt to exploit the natural ability of young possums, even more than adults, to stay hidden, disappearing completely. I could usually spot the other possums before I spotted him, and he was always the last to come down. He would stay hidden for at least half an hour after the last one had departed, before he ventured to break cover.

Of course the other possums had a say in matters, too. Having discovered that I would buy them off with food to distract them from him, they started coming to me on the off-chance, which was not what I wanted as far as he was concerned. Time after time Joey would put in appearance aloft and start to come down, then Another Possum would suddenly appear out of the bushes, get some food from me, and, despite my best efforts to head it elsewhere, take it up the cedar wattle to eat. Whereupon Joey would promptly disappear again. The stranger would pursue its own business with the tree, which took anything from ½ hour to 2 hours, then Joey would wait another half hour before starting to come down again. Even then, as he got older, he would still sometimes come down to just above my reach, sit with me for a while, then change his mind and go back up again.

It became apparent that my presence was likely to attract, rather than repel, Other Possums, and at the same time evident that he knew what he was doing, and didn't in fact want my presence, except for company once in a while, if he were in the mood. I fell back into the previous pattern, letting him go where he liked, when he liked, coming out for him only if he seemed overdue, or for an audible emergency.

All in all, I saw a lot of that tree, and the possums who used it. Joey was always the last to come down - or intended to be. Whenever he finally came down to me, his sparkling eyes, and every muscle in his body, showed me how proud and delighted he was with his achievement, fooling the others completely and getting back with his fur intact. But one night, after everyone else had finally gone, he was coming down the trunk, pleased as Punch with himself, and I was congratulating him as he came - he always liked to have my approval - when, from above, down came an adult male who forthwith proceeded to jump upon him. Joey was a canny little male possum, but the world also contains canny big male possums. Joey took off into the bushes, to return a considerable time later.

While all this was gradually developing, another aspect of his independence was developing simultaneously. After he vanished a week after he arrived, I decided to make sure he knew his way home, in case of a re-occurrence. I had used the window as a short cut in and out of my room as a child, so now I left it open when I took him out, and used it when I brought him back, leaning a beam against it so that he could climb from the ground to the window himself.

I then started establishing a definite route back to the window. For the first three nights I carried him on my shoulder, stopping outside the window and putting him on the bottom of the beam, then climbing in myself and calling him to follow. At that stage, having lost his Mummy twice, there was nothing he wanted less than to lose her again, and he had no hesitation about coming. Thereafter I made him walk home, at least from that part of the grounds where the route we were establishing connected up with those to all the other possible places to which he would want to go.

Like Snoopy after him, he would, of course, scamper at my heels like a little dog - or a baby possum following its mother. Once I discovered this, I made a habit of literally taking them for walks, so that they'd know the way back, at least until their begging and pleading persuaded me that they were tired, and wanted to be picked up. Joey would jump into my arms; Snoopy tried, but couldn't, so she just put her arms up like a human toddler to be picked up - as long as she was with me. As they got bolder, they would start to take the lead, waiting for me if I showed signs of being left behind, pointing out to me, with nose and eyes, anything of particular interest they'd discovered, looking and sniffing, first at it, then at me - `Look! Look what I've found! Isn't it good? Isn't it interesting?'

The only disadvantage of the system is that it establishes ground, not tree routes. I had to leave it up to them to replace ground with above ground when they were physically capable of doing so.

Joey learnt the way home after he'd walked it about three times, and started to take the lead when we were on the home stretch.

One night, when he was still quite small, I had him parked in one of the trees not far from the house and he apparently got tired of waiting for me to come and get him. He appeared in the window of his own accord. I still went out to get him, there was no abrupt change, but gradually he came back by himself more and more frequently. And he also started to go out on his own, so that by the time he was about four months old he was going out and coming back himself. Even so, I still went out if he became overdue, or if there was too much disturbance.

By a fluke, and for totally different reasons of my own, Joey's growing independence followed that same pattern as that I later found to be the case with babies in the house-group and Kylie's children at Ingleside. At the time, it was pure good luck, not good management, and I can't pretend otherwise; the only virtue, if such it was, on my part was to come to the situation without preconceptions, and let Joey himself take the initiatives. Even the occasional maternal surveillance when the baby is old enough to do most things for itself has parallels.

In the meantime, I had tried to house-train him, with little or no success. At first I tried smacking him, and rubbing his nose in his droppings, to no avail - of course, all he got was his own smell, which is the reverse of unpleasant to a possum. Then I hit on the idea of using a mild version of the punishment meted out by possums to impudent youngsters. At a time when he was being thrown twenty feet out of a tree by the others, I started throwing him four feet out of the window into a lantana bush whenever he started to lift his tail.

He understood that I was angry, and that distressed him very much, but it didn't improve matters from the sanitary point of view. Finally, I tried shutting him out the window - `Go away, I don't want you if you do things like that.' I did it only twice. The distress it caused him, as he scrabbled at the window, begging and pleading to be let in, is something I don't like to remember, just as I don't like to remember Snoopy's on the rare occasions when I had to use such extreme measures with

her. It really was the worst thing I could do to him. The punishment was out of all proportion to the crime.

After that I pretty well gave up. There is no natural behaviour pattern in possums that you can utilise to house-train them, as there is in a dog or cat. Joey, baby possum that he was, was pathetically eager to please me an win my approval in any way he could, but he just didn't understand. The action is performed unthinkingly in a healthy possum, without really noticing it. Possums are browsing animals - they graze and defecate frequently, in small quantities, like a goat or cow. Terrestrial predators such as dogs and cats have an interest in the disposal of their own waste - they don't want to draw attention to their presence by a pungent smell that will frighten away their prey. To a possum, forty feet up a tree, what falls on the ground below doesn't make much difference. Terrestrials can't get it up there, anyway.

The problem in fact ameliorated itself as he became older: he stayed out most of the night, and when bad weather or inclination kept him home, he tended to relieve himself while sitting on the window, so that the mess was confined to one area, if not eliminated.

As he gradually became more independent, he made his own changes in the sleeping arrangements. First he moved under the bed, a boxed-in divan with a single opening and no drawers. After a few nights he decided that wouldn't do, and shifted to the darkest corner on top of the wardrobe.

He had, from the time he was able, always taken a great interest in the wardrobe when in his exploring mood. He gained access to the top of it by skimming up one or the other of the door jambs, with the door closed, so that he was climbing something not much more than ¼ inch deep. He then proceeded sideways, across the token lintel, also ¼ to ½ inch deep, one hind and one fore foot working together, twisting his body like a contortionist, so that his face, at least, and the uppermost part of his torso, pointed towards the wardrobe. Finally, he jumped the last foot across the empty air, taking off from a position which gave him only the barest minimum thrust against the wall. Now that his nest was up there, he paid particular attention to the bottom of the jambs, chest-marking them vigorously, and very frequently, almost every night.

The sleeping arrangements were not, however, immutable. He usually woke me when he came in, sniffling in my ear and kissing me, anxious that I should come to and acknowledge him before he went to bed. Sometimes he got in with me for a while, sometimes he went up on to the wardrobe straight away. And there were still nights when I woke up, lying on my back, with a possum stretched out full length on his back, between my arm and my side, his head pillowed on my shoulder, blissfully asleep. And not the slightest idea how he'd got there without waking me.

At this stage we tried to persuade him to live outside. My father constructed a highly suitable possum box, and put it up one of his original trees, near the house. The tree at that stage belonged to no one except Joey, and the box, as after events showed, was indeed a very nice nest. It was an old fruit-case, with an extra piece of wood to reinforce the floor, projecting in the front to form a small balcony for the necessary reconnaissance a possum makes before leaving its nest. The top, bottom, sides and back were waterproofed by covering them with several layers of very heavy duty plastic, with a projection at the top to give shelter for the front. There was a stiff sliding panel in the front, left so that only an easily defensible entrance, about six inches wide and a little higher, was left at the end. The box was firmly attached to the branch, about six or eight feet from the ground.

Joey simply wouldn't have it. He thought it was fun to explore at first, but when it came to the question of sleeping in it, nothing could induce him to co-operate. I tried putting him in there during the daytime, staying with him, leaving it for him to work out for himself, everything. He just became so distressed that I had to relent, and take him inside. It was a very nice nest, but he knew a nicer one inside, and, possum fashion, he wanted the nest he chose, and so knew to be safe, not the one somebody else selected. Thereafter, when he was in that tree, he avoided the box.

His attitude to me was always the same - loyalty, affection, respect, eagerness to please, invariable politeness, and he demonstrated his love by kissing and cuddling me, even after he himself had assumed the more sober behaviour befitting an adult gentleman - meditation instead of play, more dignified movements instead of gymnastics.

Even so, he was very much a possum. One day I stupidly woke him suddenly, when he was in his own nest on top of the wardrobe, bringing my hand down from above and behind to pick him up, the direction of a bird attack. Not properly awake, he reacted by reflex, swinging round and biting me. He was, of course, appalled when he realised what he had done, contrite and remorseful in the extreme. But the fault was mine.

He did, however, discriminate between his humans. He liked my parents, and was always careful with his claws when handled by, or handling, them - he'd walk up their bare arms and legs too - and he enjoyed their applause and admiration. When he was a baby, he occasionally took a short nightly walk with one of them if I were sick.

But he recognised only one mother, and only one authority. At that time I was working in the city, and occasionally had to take night shifts. When I did, Master Joe perforce had to stay inside until I got home. My mother gave him his dinner, but if she delayed too long for His Highness' liking, he would march out into the kitchen, stalk up to her, and very deliberately nip the big toe of her right foot, as a reminder. She was just the hired help.

DEPARTURE

As he got on for five months old, it became apparent that he was growing up. His behaviour was becoming more sedate, he came and went as he pleased, and often stayed out all night. He also began to attract more and more hostile attentions from adult possums, and he developed a mannerism, apparently to comfort himself.

As a baby he had never attempted to suckle from me. In fact, when I offered him milk on my finger when I first picked him up, he bit it instead, fastening on with a bulldog grip so that I was trapped for several minutes, finger in the air with four inches of baby possum suspended from it by his jaws, and no way of detaching him without hurting him, until he finally got tired.

But now he started to knead me with his nose, any soft part of my body he could get access to. When he came in at night, and, as he always did, checked to see that I was in bed, he now started to announce his presence by kneading whatever part of my person was available. I tell you, you ain't lived until you've been woken suddenly in the middle of the night by an icy cold, pointed possum nose abruptly thrust into your armpit.

Fortunately Joey, though knowing me for his mother, had never been too sure how far my person extended. As a tiny baby, he simply couldn't see all of me at once, and his consternation the first few times he saw me take my clothes off to go to bed would have been funny, if it hadn't been so serious to him. So now he also started to knead my discarded clothes, and then, ultimately for preference, the pillow; by making them easy for him to get at, and myself harder, I assisted his preference along. As things got tougher outside, he spent more and more time with the pillow,

kneading it for hours on end.

As he reached the critical six months age, he became more and more affectionate towards me, and more and more unwilling to go outside. If I took him out, he'd go up the tree I put him in, wait for a few minutes to fulfil his duty to me out of politeness, then come down and head for home.

I knew what the situation was - the mating season was in full swing outside - and indeed I didn't want him to be chased away. I hoped that if we could survive the mating season, he could remain as the resident male. So I didn't push him, though occasionally my conscience got the better of me and I took him out for a while and stayed with him, as I had done when he was a baby. Then left him, and after a very short time he'd be back inside. He was, at that stage, even more affectionate towards me than ever.

He did, in fact, weather the worst of the mating season. Then one night, in April 1970, seven months almost to the day from the time he appeared, I took him out as usual and left him in a tree near the house. He had been particularly unwilling to come with me that night, but I took him out, anyway. And he didn't come back.

That was the last time I can say for certain that I saw him. There was no disturbance that night, no possum fights close at hand, nothing to give any warning. He simply vanished.

Needless to say, I was frantic. As far as I was concerned, he'd given ample evidence that he didn't want to go, in his behaviour towards me, and in his reluctance to so much as poke his nose outside. I was sure something terrible had happened to him. And there was a new male, Butch, camped outside the window opposite my room.

I searched everywhere, all over the property and the neighbouring properties. I advertised, and responded to every call that came.

At night I went round and round, calling him and whistling him. I found a lot of other possums, but not Joey.

Or perhaps I did find him. All the Newport possums drink, but only in small quantities. Even when Joey was weaned, he still loved his milk, so he still got it, together with water and whatever of my weak coffee he could cadge. Knowing this, I worked out that he would have to go to the creek to drink. When I had exhausted the possibilities downstream, I took up position one night above a small waterfall, just inside our boundary and near another house where possums were regularly fed, the house where I found Jenny being courted by two males simultaneously. From experience, I took a sleeping bag, and settled down to wait.

I was actually dozing when, sure enough, a young male came down to the creek to drink. He collided with the sleeping bag, then marched straight up it towards my head, just as Joey always did, by this time automatically, on the bed. I sat up to collect my possum and spoke to him, relieved. And he took off. His reaction was not the same as the usual temporary panic of a startled possum. I can only describe it as one of horror.

He was a young male, in all respects identical to Joey - who was, of course, a perfectly formed young male without any distinguishing marks or injuries - and different from another grey young male I'd found in the same vicinity, a Sally type. At the time, I concluded that it couldn't have been Joey - perhaps it was the mysterious twin that the book assured me he must have had. In the light of subsequent events, I rather think it was Joey.

Meanwhile, I found possums galore. Joey had known his name, or rather that a particular call-note of mine was meant for him, so I went

round calling him. When, in the course of my searches, I found it necessary to corner a possum for identification purposes, I gave it some food by way of apology. Apologies were always accepted with alacrity. And when I passed that way the next night, the same possum appeared in answer to my call, and the same thing would happen - I'd feed it to get close enough to identify it.

The fact that Joey knew that `Joe-Poss' meant him, exclusively, didn't prevent every other possum in the vicinity from answering, once there seemed a chance that that sound meant food. Furthermore, they were only too delighted to learn by each other's experience. At first I'd find one possum in a particular place at a particular time, then when it returned the next night, there'd be another sitting nearby, watching. Naturally, I went to look at it, and made suitable apologies for disturbing it when it turned out to be another case of mistaken identity. The next night there'd probably be yet another.

At first I was delighted. The more possums that came to me, the greater the chance that Joey would be among them. But he never was.

And finally, I began to realise that I was being conned. By that time I had developed a regular nightly round. They had trained me to appear with food at a certain time, in a certain place, convenient to them and easily reconcilable with their own nightly routines.

So I dropped the `Kimmon Joe-Poss', and just whistled.

NAMES & LABELS

I gave them all labels, for my own convenience. Most of them, in fact, would come whatever I called them, as long as it wasn't late-for-breakfast. But some actually did know their names, or rather that particular call-note was meant for them: Joey knew `Joe-Poss'; Snoopy knew `Snoopy', or `Snoop', and responded to the words even without the calling intonation - she also knew her other pet name, reserved for use in private, in sleep rituals and greeting rituals; Foxy knew her name, and also `My Fox; most surprisingly of all, Mephistopheles knew `Meph', although he must have had half a dozen such names in his life. The rest, including Jenny, did not.

There isn't time to talk about all of them, but I'll talk about a few, who have some bearing on Snoopy's story.

JENNY & TWIDDLY

The first false alarms were provided by Jenny, who, as I mentioned before, was identical to Joey in appearance. A couple of nights after Joey vanished I found her just outside, with a young grey lover - not Joey, but with two such similar possums rapidly changing places, they were enough to keep my attention until I was sure of the identification. They were also the first pair of possum lovers I had seen, and beautiful enough in their own right to make me want to watch them.

At about the same time, there was a terrible to-do in her nest in the roof. It sounded as if a young possum was being murdered. Finally, I moved a board inside the house a little, and looked. There was Jenny, with her new, even furrier baby. His squawks, as we later discovered, merely meant that Jenny was washing him, and he objected to having his bowels cleaned out.

Later we heard him at night, crying for hours in the roof. I knew where Jenny was - over the hill, being courted by two red-patch males at once. With much trepidation, and mainly just to make absolutely sure it wasn't Joey who had somehow persuaded an Older Woman to accept him on that basis, we looked in.

By glimpsing the different parts of the baby one at a time, we eventually established that he <u>was</u> only a baby, but certainly as old, probably older, than Joey when he first demanded bread. So we gave him a tiny piece of bread to console him. Jenny would have known, of course - in

later times even I could tell where Snoopy had been by the smell of distinctive leaves on her breath. We were worried that this might make Jenny reject him, as per the book, but in fact it did nothing of the kind.

We realised only years later, after Jenny had raised Snoopy in conjunction with me when she couldn't feed her, and subsequently attempted to dump two more awkward babies on my mother, that Jenny thought it was an excellent idea. From Jenny's point of view, we were in a special relationship to her - we thought she lived in our roof, but she thought we shared her nest. Once I'd raised Joey successfully, and showed that I was a trustworthy person, she was only too pleased for us to keep an eye on her babies for part of the time, while she went a-courting. She couldn't have taken the baby with her into that imbroglio, anyway. So, if she were going at all (some mothers simply miss a season under those circumstances) she had to leave the baby in the nest - with baby-sitters. Conned again.

I labelled the baby Twiddly, for Tiny Wee Little One. My mother, with a despairing glance at the ceiling near the nest, decided it was a good generic name for baby possums in general. Adult possums don't normally foul their nests unless immobilised by illness or injury, but babies are babies, whatever the species. There is no standard soubriquet for baby possums, like joey for baby kangaroos, so twiddlies they became.

Twiddly, *par excellence*, was therefore a very spoilt baby. All little possums have to be left alone by their mothers at times, but not all little possums have baby-sitters. He behaved accordingly. I've heard performances from babies who don't want to be washed, but he really took the cake. He carried on as if Jenny were eating him. And his lungs were excellent.

Once he came out on her back, his formal birthday, he was only too delighted to make my closer acquaintance, and Jenny, provided she could see what I was doing, was quite happy for me to make friends with him. He readily came down on to my shoulder, and even let me go for short walks with him still aboard. On one occasion, however, I did something very stupid.

He was so furry that I didn't in fact know where he was a he, so I finally decided to find out for sure. I picked him up and turned him over to examine him. He struggled and screamed as if I were skinning him alive. The more he squalled, the more panic-stricken I became. I didn't dare let him go while he was terrified, for fear <u>he</u> would run panic-stricken into something he couldn't handle.

Jenny, who was sitting up a tree behind me eating, at first ignored the whole performance. But when the baby continued to yell, she became worried. Jenny didn't normally like to be touched by humans, but finally she grew so agitated that she came down the tree and jumped on to my back.

Fortunately, I had the sense to just keep on doing what I was doing. She peered anxiously over my shoulder, then gradually relaxed. Eventually, she gave a snort of disgust, jumped back up the tree, and went on with her dinner.

She knew her own son, and knew, better than I, how prone he was to carry on over nothing at all. She probably thought I was washing him.

Twiddly was only too happy to exploit his situation with regard to the house. I still left the window open, in the hope that Joey would come back, but it was Twiddly who made expeditions into my room. When, in due course, like Joey, he started to mature and became the lowest form of possum life outside, he would come sneaking into my room, jump on the bed, and beat up the bedclothes.

Like Joey, he retired into fantasy. Everyone else was beating him up, so he took it out on an imaginary enemy. Unfortunately, the part of

the bedclothes which made the best mock enemy was the part raised into a hump by me, especially if I moved. He apparently couldn't smell me through the clothes, except as he smelt me on the rest of the bedding, and didn't know it was me he was attacking with considerable force and no inhibitions. I had some trouble persuading him to keep his attentions to a genuinely inanimate fetish.

Like Joey, too, he weathered the worst of the mating season before he left, at the age of seven months.

MRS. POSS Some of my other new acquaintances made their appearance in a very dramatic way. The first was Mrs. Poss.

I was outside one night fairly early in the piece, when I heard a dog barking, seriously, on an adjoining vacant property. I found a large female possum, her pouch just slightly distended by a baby, about ten feet up a dead tree, with a labrador barking and leaping and making every effort to get her. She clung there, just out of reach.

I yelled at the labrador, and tried to drive it away, and all the while the possum just stayed there, in full view, frightened, but making no attempt to go higher. The dog's owners arrived, and collared it. In the meantime I had spotted a second, smaller possum, hiding at the very top of the tree.

Once the dog was removed, the older one was quite sanguine about accepting reassurance and food. I wanted to identify the younger one, so I stayed and watched. It was a juvenile female, also slightly pouch gravid, and once you saw the two together there could be no doubt that she and the older one were mother and daughter.

The mother soon demonstrated that she could go up the tree with complete facility. Mrs. Poss had been deliberately exposing herself, to draw the dog's attention, while her juvenile daughter got to safety up the tree.

I didn't ever begrudge Mrs. Poss a hand-out after that, even though she wasn't Joey. We gradually evolved a standard meeting place in a clump of banksias, just on the corner of our property, beyond the labrador's place and the adjacent vacant lot. She was, without a doubt, the biggest, ugliest possum I had ever seen. The caricature portrait which appears in most drawings would do her no injustice whatsoever.

She came regularly, and showed not the slightest hesitation about climbing up my legs to find her dinner. She didn't beg, and she didn't actually demand. Her attitude was that of a good-natured adult persuading a sulky and recalcitrant child to behave itself by turning the matter into a game. `Nif, Nif, Nif - where's the bread? Come on, I know it's there. Where have you hidden it tonight?' It was, in fact, in my duffle coat pocket, as her nose informed her. So she simply climbed up my legs, gently but firmly, to get it.

She was a very large possum indeed, and one night my knees just gave way, and I collapsed on my back in the grass. That suited her purpose admirably. She just planted her substantial self on my middle, so I couldn't get up, and proceeded to rifle my pockets to her own satisfaction.

After that I made a point of making her my last call for the night, giving her her share, then letting her satisfy herself by nosing out the leftover scraps and crumbs in my pockets. I found it more comfortable to back up to her tree and let her climb down over my shoulder to investigate my pockets from above.

Of course, as soon as she established herself in the food-line, her associates started coming too. First Daughter, who had tended to hang back nervously at first, and only accept food at arm's length for both of us, became bolder. Then I became vaguely aware of a third possum hanging

around in the background, watching. Two nights after I first noticed this, Grandpa suddenly marched up to me and greeted me like an old friend, much to my astonishment.

Up to this point, all the adult possums I'd met wanted, essentially, one thing: food. Joey loved me, but Joey thought I was his mother, so I wasn't really prepared for the next development.

Most possums took what I gave them - usually one piece of bread - ate it, tried to cadge some more, and when it wasn't forthcoming departed for the night. But more and more frequently, Mrs. Poss did not. She remained on my shoulder - or rather both shoulders, stretched from one to the other, since she didn't really fit on one - long after all the food was gone, and she had satisfied herself on this point by personal investigation. Or she would remain sitting quietly on a branch beside my head.

She stayed because she liked my company. As simple as that.

I didn't know quite how to please an adult possum, apart from feeding it. At first, I tried taking her for walks on my shoulder. She got off as soon as I moved a few steps, obviously offended. Riding on mother's back is for baby possums, and to be carried is an insult to an adult. Furthermore, like St. Peter, they do not like being borne whither they would not go.

I stroked her, and found after a while that the hairless insides of her ears got very cold in winter. So I got into the habit of taking them between my fingers to warm them.

That was all. And that was about all she wanted - someone to sit with quietly for a while each night, treating her gently, respecting her dignity. She was a very old possum, who took her maternal responsibilities very seriously. And she seemed grateful to have ten or twenty minutes a night with me to keep an eye on things, and let her relax and get some attention herself, just for a break.

Sitting with her, I came to learn a lot about the nocturnal wildlife. Mrs. Poss would hear something, prick her ears, and look. I would follow her gaze, and eventually I would hear it too. The she would identify it, and relax - `Oh, it's only one of those.' It was from her I first learnt that ring-tails don't count as possums to bushy-tails.

Sometimes, if she could not identify the noise, and remained anxious, I would take the torch and go and look for myself. If it was the labrador, who still prowled hopefully, I'd send it home - it was in other respects a very nice dog who knew me well. If it was a false alarm, I'd say so, and reassure Mrs. Poss, pointing out its location with the torch, then switching it off so she could see for herself and relax. After a time she would shoot a questioning look at me when something puzzled her, and by word, tone and gesture that grew up as a `language' between us, I could set her mind at rest.

Mostly, the noise turned out to be some harmless nocturnal creature that she could identify. We'd just sit and watch it go about its business.

One night, however, we saw something that baffled us both. I was acquainted with the ring-tails by this time, but I'd always seen them with their tails, if not in use, hanging down and curled inwards and under, as they are shown in illustrations. On this occasion, however, I saw one, I'll swear it, following its usual path through the trees, with a bundle of twigs on its back, its tail curled upwards and backwards around them to keep them in place.

I looked at Mrs. Poss, and she looked at me. And we both sort of blinked, and shook our heads, and decided perhaps we'd better not have seen it.

She was the possum. I thought she'd know what it was all about. But she was as bewildered as I was, and turned to me for explanation.

Actually what it was all about was nest-building, and I've seen the same thing since, at Ingleside.

A crisis of sorts appeared on the horizon. The vacant allotment across which she came acquired an owner, and with it a house. People who aren't used to possums don't understand them - some are even afraid of them - so I was worried about what was going to happen to the old lady.

I decided I'd better do all I could in the way of introductions. I'm strongly averse to putting animals through tricks for my own benefit - ego trips at the expense of an animal's dignity just aren't on. There are many animals who do it willingly, delighted by the applause and admiration of a new audience, and happy to please you at the same time. But to make them do it, without knowing that the individual is like that, is an insult, and a betrayal of their trust.

Mrs. Poss was very much an adult possum, an old lady who, notwithstanding her antics with me, possessed great dignity. If she, of her own accord, wanted to come and sit on my shoulder, that was one thing. But to ask her to do it for a strange audience, whose reaction I couldn't predict, was another.

Nevertheless, the situation seemed to call for desperate measures, so I introduced myself, and her, across the fence one night. The new people couldn't have been nicer, and it couldn't have worked out better.

I told them as much as I knew of her history, and `put her through her paces'. She behaved like an old trouper. I called for a volunteer, and got one, rather tentative and nervous - with more courage than I would have had in the same situation I might say, if, like her, I'd never seen a possum before. Oh the look of those claws! Mrs. Poss behaved impeccably, coming down on to her shoulder, accepting food, eating it prettily and daintily, gentle as a lamb. No one could have had any doubts about her nature after that.

Her new humans fell for her immediately. They were very sympathetic, and worried only about seducing my possum away from me. I assured them that she was her own possum, not mine, and it wouldn't make any difference. She was an old lady possum, and life is very tough for them - a perpetual stream of babies, each seeming heavier than the last, old bones not getting any younger, the same hazards and some knew ones, without the old agility to cope with them. The more friends she had, the better. Their house actually had what ours lacked - a raised balcony with a handy tree leading up to it. Mrs. Poss, and her entire group, were entertained royally thenceforth, although she still kept her tryst with me with about the same regularity as before.

It became clear, about that time, that I would have to take Snoopy somewhere else, so I gradually eased out of the picture, paying her only occasional visits. Mrs. Poss's new humans, in honour of their own origin, named her new baby Pom.

I don't know what you call my relationship with Mrs. Poss, if you don't call it friendship. She wanted food, of course, but beyond that she still wanted my company. It's a relationship that possums simply don't have with each other - if they want such a relationship, it can only be with a non-possum.

FOXY There was one other possum at Newport who was like that too. She also made her appearance in a rather dramatic fashion.

She arrived in a state of utter terror one night, in one of the trees near the creek, on the opposite side of the property from Mrs. Poss. It was only a few days after Joey disappeared, and she was about the same

age, size, and, from a distance, general appearance. She was too frightened to do more than huddle in the top of the trees, and I rather desperately wanted a look at her, so I left some food in the lowest fork and went away.

Next night she was back, still terrified, but this time she came a little lower to collect the food when I backed off to a distance, and I could see her more clearly. She was a very small juvenile female, one of the russet-coloured creek possums, frightened out of her wits, and showing obvious signs of having been `raped', too petrified even to clean herself.

My heart went out to that one. She was a juvenile, like Joey, displaced and frightened. I wanted very much to help her, if I could. She was so afraid that at first the best I could do for her was to leave her something nice to eat and go away so she could come down and get it.

Gradually, however, she settled down, and started to come down the tree when she saw me approaching, to take the food directly from me. I persuaded her to sit on my shoulder - she was, in fact, the only possum I've ever tried to `tame'. At first she did so only for the sake of the food, but later she came to like it, and to like simply being with me, as Mrs. Poss did. I named her Foxy.

Later, when she settled in to having babies, she would come along the ground to me, jump up in my lap, baby and all, have her food, then just sit there for a while, after the others had departed for the night.

Her territory straddled the fence-line, like that of Mrs. Poss on the opposite side of the property, but in Foxy's case there was another possum feed-house on the far side. She was one of those possums who have main alternative nests at either end of their territories, and spend lengthy periods in each in turn, though I did meet her in her territory even when she was living in her tree at the other end and not coming to me to be fed.

Her absences were often weeks, or on occasions months, long. When she came back after the first unusually long absence she was suffering from a common possum ailment which causes partial loss of fur, initially over the rump, and whether part of the same thing or not, often seems to occur in conjunction with eye problems. We consulted a vet, who, poor man, did his best to diagnose from afar - Foxy was not the sort of possum you can catch by force and hale off to the vet without doing more harm than good. The treatment proved successful, and though the problems recurred later we could always alleviate her difficulties as long as she was with us.

She remained, however, subject to minor ailments. She was a very small possum, and made life more difficult for herself by being over-assiduous in her maternal duties, keeping her babies in her pouch till they were so big that she could hardly sit down properly, keeping her daughters with her in the nest in the tree on our place until well after they were mature, although there was really only room for one adult possum, and the one who went in second, often Foxy herself, was left with a rump sticking out.

Her minor ailments in fact allowed us to be sure it was Foxy returning each time after her absences. Eventually, however, there came upon the scene one of her daughters, Sherry, who remained with her in her nest for nearly a year, and sometimes occupied it later in her absences. Sherry was a beautiful honey-blond as a baby, a little golden possum. But she grew up to be identical to her mother, and subject to the same sorts of ailments. So it was not in fact certain which one of them returned the last time they were both absent - my mother thought it was Foxy, I thought it was Sherry (though of course I hoped it was Foxy). Which is the reason for the dotted line in the genealogy.

MEPHISTOPHELES About five or six weeks after Joey disappeared, a new, large red male arrived. He was very big, with even longer ears than Jenny, somewhat

ragged from fighting. He had a very black band across his nose, and very heavily marked, slanting, `eyebrows'. A handsome, satanic looking fellow.

He made himself known to me by greeting me as a long lost relation, much to my astonishment, as, to the best of my knowledge, I had never clapped eyes on him before.

But he had a recent injury to his right eye, and all hell broke loose, anyway - `Oh, poor darling!' `Should we take him to the vet?' `Quick, where's a banana - Oh, you poor pet'. He was not in the least perturbed by our putting a torch on his injured eye. He simply sat there as if he expected it all. And loved the banana. Absolutely Delicious. Much appreciated.

My mother named him Mephistopheles, and she couldn't have done better. She named him for his appearance, but it suited his character to a tee. We tried to shorten it formally to Mephisto, but he rapidly, and irrevocably, became Meph.

Mephistopheles was a clown. His recent recovery and subsequent arrival at a place where he wanted to be put him in high spirits, and he gambolled like a three months old youngster, performing gymnastics, begging with extravagant gestures, showing off in all directions.

But I was in the habit of staying out with the possums longer than is usual, and it soon became evident that, while he did play for the fun of it, his best performances were reserved for a paying audience. He'd apparently discovered that cute baby tricks tend to elicit admiration, oohs and ahs, and food from humans, and acted accordingly. He was, in fact, a professional performer.

No wonder he showed no surprise when we made a fuss over his poor eye. The injury was real enough, and serious enough to put him in danger until he adjusted to it; the pity was justified. He did indeed need a helping hand. But when I came to know him better I had no doubt that he made the best of his disadvantage, and had traded on it, from house to house, from wherever he came from to our place, like a mediaeval beggar displaying his deformity.

Meph anecdotes are without number. He was the only possum I've met that certainly had a sense of humour, though I've suspected it in others. Like all rudimentary humour it was slightly cruel, but marked, and clearly demonstrated on one occasion.[xvii] But this isn't the place for Meph stories, so they will have to wait.

JOE There was one other new arrival, however, which does need a mention at this point.

Meph departed for places unknown in due course, and about eighteen months after Joey disappeared, when Snoopy and I had been living at Ingleside for nearly six months, a new male showed up, confident, and cocky, and young and strong, the image of Jenny but somewhat smaller - so like her in fact, that we sometimes got confused if we couldn't see both at once. The red patches were just starting to show on his shoulders.

He knew the place very, very well, and, together by that time with others, frequented my window, using it as a short meditation place, although he didn't particularly want to come in. He didn't seem to know the people at first, but he soon developed a curious habit. When he came to my mother to ask for food, if she didn't see him immediately he would walk deliberately up to her, and firmly but gently nip the big toe of her right foot.

My mother said it was Joey, and firmly named him Joe. I, rather hurt that he didn't know me, demurred. It could be Twiddly. Another possum might coincidentally have developed the same mannerism - she herself had to admit later that two of his daughters picked up the trick. There was

not, and never had been, any distinguishing mark to settle the point.

Towards the beginning of 1972, I brought Kylie, Snoopy's daughter who was growing up, back to Newport for a visit. I wanted to see whether there was any chance of turning Kylie loose at Newport, as it was already becoming clear that she and Snoopy weren't going to be able to coexist peacefully.

The attempt was mildly disastrous. Kylie was terrified at the sight of so many possums, and the first scuffle sent her fleeing into the bush. I went round calling, `Kimmon Ki-Ki,' and eventually arrived at the cedar wattle.

`Kimmon Ki-Ki' has the same intonation as `Kimmon Joe-Poss' the way I call, and suddenly Joe came hurtling out of the bushes, just like young Joey used to do. He stopped dead, and looked bewildered. He didn't seem to know why he had come. There as a step-ladder standing nearby, and eventually he decided to climb up it and just sat there quietly for half an hour, on a step level with my shoulder. Finally, he went away.

It was as if he had responded to the call automatically, as a conditioned reflex, and couldn't quite remember what he was supposed to do after that.

Later still, he got a nasty injury to his tail, and on one occasion compounded matters by falling out from under the eaves during the day. We collected him and put him in a box in my room. He got out immediately, of course. Possum fashion, he wanted nothing to do with the nest someone else chose for him. He had to pick one for himself to know it was safe.

He went straight across the room and jumped up on the bed, and again looked bewildered. It was as if he had automatically gone to a place of safety, but found himself exposed instead, forgetting that he was supposed to burrow under the bedcover.

Maybe. Maybe not. I rather think I'm convinced.

When I took Snoopy up to Ingleside, I was in a quandary about the others. Certainly they were capable of looking after themselves, while there was no place in the world for Snoopy, unless I made one. So in a sense the decision was made for me. Mrs. Poss already had good friends of her own, and I finally prevailed on my mother to `just feed Jenny and Foxy occasionally.' Of course, she inherited the whole group.

Honeybunch

She maintained stern detachment until Foxy's second baby, Baby Bliss, later Honeybunch, then Honey, came along.

Babies are forever tumbling off their mothers' backs, and once we found that it didn't impair the mother-baby relationship we'd simply scoop up the little one and pass it back to its mother, who'd dangle down to receive it with her front hands, if necessary. Usually the mother is most grateful, but the baby often objects to being picked up by a stranger.[q] Honey was duly rescued from the ground in her turn, but instead of squalling and struggling, she just snuggled down happily in my mother's arms. My poor mother was a goner from then on. It was Honey who later first discovered the virtues of the outside box made for Joey.

When Snoopy and I made our first return visit to Newport, a couple of months after we'd left, it caused some confusion. Snoopy retained the same peripheral status as she always had, but I was a different matter.

My mother and I were about the same size, and occasionally wore each other's clothes; from living in the same house and eating the same food

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q. And rightly so. The chances of the animal which pounces on a fallen baby being friendly are so remote that it would be extremely dangerous for them to behave any other way in most situations.

we would have had much the same smell to a possum. After initial caution they had, apparently, decided that she was, after all, the same human who had always fed them, just changed a little in the course of time.

When I showed up, there were two of us, and they didn't know what to make of it. When Snoopy and I made our second visit, the problem had been resolved. My mother was the human who had always fed them; I was just one of the admiring visitors come to look at the possums.

Only one possum showed any sign of remembering me as a separate individual, and continued to do so. It was in fact the possum who had seen me less frequently that any of the others - Foxy.

HAND-REARING POSSUMS

This is not a *vade mecum*. There is no doubt that a possum hand-reared within an established group, in contact with them, will be accepted by the group in the sense that they will treat it exactly like any other local possum of the same age, gender and physical capabilities. And if it is otherwise normal, physically competent, and with its basic behaviour patterns intact, then it will grow up to be a viable possum.

Man smell, as such, is irrelevant. Possums divide other possums into those whose scent is familiar and those whose scent is strange. A possum who smells of humans is a familiar possum to others who smell of the same humans; a possum who smells of strange humans is a strange possum to possums who smell of different humans; a possum who smells of any humans is a strange possum to possums who do not smell of humans at all, but then so is a possum who, for similar reasons, smells of different vegetation from a different place. Possums derive their smell in part from their environment, what they eat and where they live. Those whose environment includes humans, and human food, derive part of their own smell from those particular humans, just as they derive it in part from particular trees they frequent. Man-smell is no more, and no less, important than any other similar factor in their olfactory environment.

But I hate to think of the fate of a baby hand-reared in total isolation from other possums, then turned loose among strangers.

Most babies which survive hand-rearing are healthy to begin with, and remain so, or they survive not at all. They grow up physically and psychologically normal, and need to declare independence, move out, and live a normal possum life governed by possum preoccupations and possum `laws' - behaviour patterns, both innate and learned. But raising a baby in isolation, then, when it matures, taking it and shoving it up a tree in t bush and saying, `Go free, go happy!' might or might not work. Free, perhaps, but happy, and a survivor, not for some time at least.

In the first place, it's subject to all the dangers to which any possum transported to a strange locality is exposed: new hazards, not only new in particular - which dogs are loose at what time, which places are dangerous, which are not - but also new in kind. A possum who has never seen an owl, for example, `instinctively' knows that a sudden movement from above means danger, but it may not know, for example, that an owl perched below it, in an adjacent tree, is likely to rise into the air and make such a swoop; a suburbanite possum knows about domestic dogs and cats, and perhaps cars - it does not know about flash-floods in stormwater creeks, or carrion-eating feral cats and dogs; no possum really knows how to cope with bushfires.

It will find that the vegetation is almost completely different, and it will have to start from the beginning and gradually find out what is good to eat; it will miss the human food element, more concentrated in nutritional value than leaves; in short, it will have to adjust to a radically new diet.

Like all possums who suddenly find themselves transported to

heaven-knows-where, it is likely to try to go home at first, and, even more than a normal suburbanite, it's likely to head for the nearest house-lights and humans if it can't do so. And God help it if the nearest house-lights lie across a main road, and it's never seen a main road before, or if the nearest humans happen to regard possums as vermin to be shot or poisoned - it is not particularly well-known that possums are protected animals, and in rural districts where possums represent at threat, real or imaginary, to crops, the law is by no means always observed even when it is known. A possum who considers humans as friends and protectors is just as likely to pick on someone who is after possum skins, or live bait to blood his greyhounds, as it is to pick on someone who takes a fancy to it.

Moreover, it will be encouraged to depart by any local possums that happen to be there. It will be treated in exactly the same way as any other strange possum of the same age, gender and size - with extreme hostility, particularly if it is female. And it will make the situation worse for itself because of its own inexperience, committing social errors a possum of its age should know how to avoid. It will no longer be a baby, whose blunders can be excused, and who will be taught proper manners by scolding, or lesser beatings. It will be an adult, a strange possum which will arouse the maximum hostility of its own kind by behaving in a manner which, in a normally reared possum, would be tantamount to deliberate provocation.

For while some possum social behaviour patterns are innate, others are learned. For example, the knowledge that another possum, apart from its own mother, must not be allowed to approach within critical distance is innate, but the corollary, the knowledge that it, itself, should not approach another possum, and what it can expect if it does, is not necessarily so - babies often wander up to the wrong mother until they learn better from experience.

Both aggression and fear reactions are innate, but there are several different fear reactions - flight, clinging, freezing or curling up in a ball. The only correct one to use in a losing fight is flight, but an isolated infant might not know this. Given the range of reactions available to it, it may select one of the stationary ones.

I have seen what happens when the wrong reaction occurs.

A female encroached on the core territory of another female, and was physically unable to escape. Unable to flee, in her desperation she clung to a branch instead. The territory holder simply kept on biting her, automatically, a reflex action. There is no inhibition mechanism in this situation, as there is in some other animals. The only stop signal is the removal of the offending presence from range. A retreating rump must be bitten until it is out of reach.

The case I am referring to was a very extreme one: the attacker was Kylie, the victim Snoopy, and Kylie had a special personal hatred for Snoopy, beyond the normal aggression reaction towards another female in her territory. Even so, intelligence came to their aid. The object of the exercise was to remove the offending presence. When the object was not achieved by this method, Kylie finally adopted another: she removed herself from critical distance by taking herself off to another part of her territory until Snoopy managed to escape.

But I hate to think what would have happened if the attacker, as well as the victim, had been in some way confined.

A healthy young possum, particularly a male released in the mating season, would stand a chance if bright, and a quick learner, as long as it had room to keep out of trouble until it did learn and there was no excessive territorial tension among the local possums. But it would be very

much up against it, having to learn as an adult all the rules of etiquette which should have been instilled into it during childhood.

Initially, a male has a better chance than a female: he will be persecuted unremittingly by the local male or males, but the females, who make up the bulk of the possum population in any given area, will be less disturbed by his arrival. The worst problem arises when he moves on: even without the added factors in the case of a possum who knows and wants humans, it is unusual for a young male to remain permanently in the same place, and the question is whether there is any danger which is totally beyond his experience and comprehension between him and the next female, or group of females, he fancies.

Matters are reversed with a young female. Initially, she is in for a much rougher time. She will be attacked, seriously and persistently, by all the local females, to whom she represents a permanent threat, a rival for nests and territory. All the local females will have the advantage of a territory holder in fights, all will be more experienced fighters, and some, at least, will be larger and stronger to boot. If she does manage to establish a territory of her own, however, then her chances are much better: she will stay, and, in a couple of year, become just a recognised neighbour, gradually achieving size and status of her own.

The situation is not completely black. A lot can be done to ease the transition - if the human mother can stay with the youngster long enough to help it integrate into the local scene, or visit it frequently, keeping a distant maternal eye on it, then it stands a much better chance. If it has portable possessions, particularly a cloth or something such from its own nest, which can go with it to its new home and reassure it by familiarity in its initial, and inevitable terror, then that's all to the good.

Conversely, you might be able to expedite its assimilation by a variant of the method Lorenz used to repatriate a rat taken from its colony and deprived of the colony smell for experimental purposes - he took material from its tribe's nest and put it into a cage, keeping the now strange rat there until it had once more acquired the common smell of its relations. Unfortunately, possums aren't as easily fooled as rats in this respect, and, since they are solitary rather than tribal animals, there is no single common local smell which is the passport to acceptance. But it would at least reduce its most conspicuous strangeness if you fed it on leaves taken from the trees frequented by the locals, leaving the leftovers in its nest for it to sleep on, for several days before releasing it among them. Small gauge wire netting, such as that which used to be used in flyscreens, is a boon in such situations. It allows a possum to be operatively in contact with its fellows - it can see and be seen, hear and be heard, smell and be smelt, know and be known - all without risking injury through actual physical contact.

Then, too, the situation with local possums varies. Mercifully possums are not biological robots, as the incident with Snoopy and Kylie demonstrates: stimulus A does not produce reaction A as invariably as night follows day. Some are more rabidly territorial than others. A not particularly ferocious male, patrolling a large territory, is likely to give a youngster a hiding when he comes across him, but otherwise ignore him as long as junior stays out of his hair. If there is no acute territorial pressure among the females, and you don't happen to arrive in someone's core territory, then a small female, modest in her territorial demands and backed up by a strange and utterly incomprehensible human may be left alone by the local females frequently enough, and long enough, to gain a toehold.

Hand-reared babies can have some advantages, too. With all

respect to the Naturists, care and the right supplementary food, whatever it happens to be in the particular case, is likely to prove beneficial, and produce a particularly strong, healthy youngster: if anyone has any doubt, I can only suggest that they go and have a look at the feral cats and dogs who have been Returned to Nature in the various sanctuaries and national parks and compare their condition with that of their well cared-for, but not over-pampered, domestic counterparts.

But none of this can entirely wipe out the disadvantage to the youngster of having to learn, all at once, near the end of its main imprintation period, everything it should have gradually been absorbing throughout its childhood. It seems obvious that undertaking the responsibility for rearing a youngster, then abandoning it at a time and in a place chosen for your own convenience, is stacking the odds against it.

It seems equally clear that, if a baby cannot be reared by its mother, it should be reared in the context of the local possum group, as far as possible as one of them, so that it grows up to be just another known local youngster who in turn knows the local conditions, whether bush or suburban, and the local possums - which in particular, are to be deferred to in order to avoid a beating - and the local possum `rules and regulations.' In this way, when it declares independence, it simply becomes one of the local possums, competing, where necessary, on the same footing as any of the other local youngsters. The more it knows about other possums the better.

For there can be no question of keeping it as a pet, in the normal sense of the word: a healthy baby will grow up to be a possum, albeit, if it has been deprived of the opportunity to develop its normal behaviour patterns, an inadequate and unviable one, and possums simply aren't the sort of animals that can be kept as pets - while they will live with you on a basis of equality, their actions and behaviour cannot be dictated by human preoccupations and convenience, as can that of long-domesticated species such as cats and dogs.

However, raising a baby to be a viable possum is not something that everyone can do - not because it is a matter of personal virtues, or intelligence, or even necessarily of having the knowledge, but because it is a matter of facilities.

First and foremost, you need all-night access to everywhere the possum is likely to go while it is still dependent on you. You have some control over the baby's peregrinations at first, but no control over the alterations the other possums are going to make in the arrangements once it starts to go further afield. You therefore need access to all the land to which the possum will go for possum reasons, about 2½ acres. But any amount of land, regardless of its size, need not be enough, for possum boundaries do not coincide with human ones: I never had access to less than about 3 acres, but at Ingleside, where I had effective access to about 12 acres while Snoopy used only one or two, in the last analysis it was not enough, because they were the wrong 12 acres.

You also need an established possum group, which, whether because you feed them, or because they live in close contact with you, consider you a familiar person.

You also need the willingness and ability to sit still all through a winter's night, and to go out with the possum whenever it, not you, wants to go, not just once a week, when it's convenient, but almost every night. And when it's older, you need to be willing to sit inside all night, ready to drop whatever you are doing and go racing out through the bush, whatever the time or weather, at the first hint of a crisis.

You need, in other words, to be extremely involved, emotionally, with the individual animal. You cannot do it if you are not.

And, if you succeed, it will in some way break your heart. If the baby is a boy, one day he will run away and leave you. If it is a girl, then one day she will bite you, because you are her mother. Joey's return, if that's what happened, was a fluke, caused by the particular possum topography and the distribution of the groups. When a boy leaves you, you will know that he is going into a situation which only a percentage of his age-group survives. You can only wish him luck, and you cannot expect to ever see him again. A female, if she is lucky, may be able to settle somewhere close at hand, and she may eventually come back to you, bringing her baby, but only after she has ceased to regard you as her mother, and accepts you merely as the human food-giver.

Furthermore, from the baby's point of view, a human mother can never be as good as a possum mother, if only because he or she cannot follow it up a tree to bail (or bale) it out of awkward situations.

From the point of view of both parties, therefore, it seems evident that hand-rearing a baby possum should be tried only as a last resort, when the only other option is killing it. Possums are very intelligent and very adaptable. They love life, and will make the most of any chance they are given. But clearly, any solution which allows the baby to stay with its own mother is preferable, and it is very seldom indeed that this is not possible.

The reason I am spending so much time rambling on about what ought to be a very rare occurrence is that, with the expansion of housing in areas such as this, and the failure of possums to die out as befits Wild Children of Nature, instead adapting to the new conditions and exploiting them, contact between possums and humans is becoming more frequent, and tragic mistakes are being made. And one of the most common is to assume that a stray baby wandering around on its own has been abandoned or orphaned.

Nine times out of ten this is not the case at all. Parking babies at the stage when they are too big to fit in the pouch but too small to travel as far as the mother intends to go is a very, very common practice, and, because possums are no more perfect than anyone else, there are quite frequently minor hitches, with the baby straying a short distance from where it was left. No baby should be assumed to be an orphan until at least the second night fails to produce its mother.

This mistake is compounded by another very common fallacy, namely that if the baby is handled by a human, its mother will reject it. Somehow, this pure Creature of Nature is defiled by the merest passing touch of a human finger, branded forever as an outcast from its kind. There is obviously no future for it, other than to be caged for life - where else but in a disused aviary!

Had I known what I now know, when Joey first appeared I would still have had to take him inside, as he was in danger of being eaten by a dog, and I would still have had to feed him and cuddle him to keep him alive. But I would have at least tried putting him up the tree under which he was found that same evening, to see if his mother would come and collect him. Since those days I have had numerous local babies, whether parked or mislaid, in my possession for a matter of minutes, hours or occasionally days. And they have all gone back to their mothers - even if I've had to bundle the baby up under my jacket and go out and find the erring parent when she doesn't show up in a reasonable time. For the most part, the mother does come back for it, a couple of hours later.

For it is simply not true to say that a mother will reject a baby once it has been handled than it is to say the reverse.

Bushy-tails - I know nothing about ringtails, or any other sort

of possums - are NOT birds. They go by their own rule book, not by that of any other species, and they are bright enough to throw away even their own rule book when the situation demands it. Whether the baby will be rejected by its mother or not after handling depends on what is meant by handling, how long it goes on for, how long the total period of separation of mother and baby has continued, and above all on the particular humans and the particular possums involved.

If there has been a protracted separation, the mother may be dubious about receiving it back at first, but there is a reasonable chance that she will finally do so. Brief physical contact between a local human and a local baby possum, so long as it takes place on the premises, will in no way impair the relationship between mother and baby.

I don't know what authority was originally responsible for the dictum that a baby bushy-tail will be rejected once it has been handled, but if whoever it was had had experience with more than one set of possums, it can never have been meant as more than a general guide, to deter people from molesting them.

As a general guide, it is an excellent one. There is every reason why baby possums should not be handled under ordinary circumstances. There is indeed a danger that the relationship between mother and baby will be impaired if the handling is too protracted or too frequent, if it is done by someone other than a resident, or if the baby, for any reason, has to be removed from the premises - for example, veterinary surgeries, with their plethora of strange strong smells, might well impose a thoroughly strange scent on the baby, particularly if the stay is protracted, and provoke some sort of rejection on the part of the mother.

Then there is the baby's side of the relationship to consider. At one stage I had to keep an injured baby, belonging to one of the most incorrigible frequenters of my room, inside for long periods on several consecutive nights, because he wasn't able to stand up to the conditions outside. I had to desist at the earliest possible moment, not because the mother showed signs of rejecting him - she did no such thing - but because the baby, like Joey, was starting to show signs of imprinting on to me, considering that I, and I alone, was his mother.

Furthermore, young babies are physically delicate, with especially sensitive eyes. You cannot help but be too rough with them at times if you handle them continuously. Moreover, you are likely to be bitten for your pains: once a baby is firmly imprinted on its own mother it resents being touched by anyone else; it is apt to turn into a miniature adult in your arms if you try to pick it up, and the result is distress on both sides. And if the mother is present, and cannot clearly see that you are doing it no harm, she is understandably likely to assume the worst, and show signs of attacking. Not all possums are as intelligent as Jenny.

So overall, `hands off baby possums' is an excellent principle.

But the generalization, designed to protect possums, should not be allowed to work against them. It should not be inflexibly applied in situations to which it is not appropriate. If someone is kind-hearted enough to extract a baby from a dangerous situation, and this involves handling it, there is no need to assume, without even trying, that its own mother won't have it back, and thus condemn it to hand-rearing, which even at its best can never be more than a poor substitute.

Clearly, it's a matter of circumstances. If the chances of a baby being rejected because the situation has dictated measures likely to give it a totally strange smell are very great, it <u>may</u> be better not to try to give it back. What the baby needs most urgently is Mother, and any mother is better than none; rejections obviously take their toll of the

baby, as do constant changes in the physical situation.

But there is no hard and fast rule either way. If it's merely a matter of picking it up off the ground, or even rescuing it from an exposed tree branch during the day, where it's in danger of being taken by a predator, and keeping it safe until the following evening, it's certainly worth a try. One can only predict the behaviour of possums as a whole: it is just as difficult to predict the behaviour of any individual possum as it is to predict the behaviour of any individual human. The mother may reject it, or she may not. You can't know until you try.

The most likely scenario is that events will be dictated by the baby itself. The mother, when she comes to collect it, may well at first take fright at your presence and the unusual situation, but the baby, unless like Joey it has already decided that you are Mummy, will automatically assume that the first possum it sees is Mummy and behave accordingly.

It will try to go to her, and call after her with its thin piping baby cry if she runs away. The chances are that she will respond automatically to the baby cry and come back, or at least stop and turn back, long enough for the baby to get to her. It in turn will automatically climb on to her back, and if it is young, then make a dive for her pouch. If it is the right mother, then the pouch will be empty, but still distended, with milk inside to comfort the little one. It will get itself, or as much of itself as it can, inside, and the mother will take off at top speed to get her lost baby home as quickly as possible, and away from enormous baby-snatching creatures that look like giant, bald, tailless possums. Once that happens, there is no question of rejection. Whatever is in her pouch is hers.

Even if she does reject it, it would be a very, very unusual female that would do any serious damage (though naturally it is not advisable to offer the baby to any passing possum that doesn't show any interest in it, particularly a male). If she no longer regards it as her baby, then she will regard it as Someone Else's Baby, and sending Someone Else's Baby about its business involves a scolding, a nip at most; the result would be the same if you offered it to the wrong female.

If the unfortunate situation does arise, then it is safer to rely on the principle that adult females are at least reluctant to harm babies of their own species than it is to automatically assume that the baby can't go home. No doubt there are exceptions even to this - I just haven't met them. Almost certainly, there is a baby-killing female possum somewhere in Australia, but you'd have to be very unlucky to strike her.

There are, of course, always exceptions to everything. Matters are different if the baby is physically disabled to the point where it will never be able to lead any semblance of a normal life. It is not necessarily always the kindest thing to do to put such animals out of their misery, merely the most expedient, <u>if</u>, and only if, there is some real alternative.

There are always those odd, rare, isolated cases where it would be the best for all concerned, human or otherwise, if the animal were raised, and kept, as a pet. For example, a crippled male, who is not suffering constant pain from his disability, but stands no chance of ever fully recovering, simply cannot be turned loose when he matures, because his life, at least at first, will be one of semi-nomadism, and if he doesn't have the physical agility to get out of the situations into which his inexperience plunges him, then he will almost inevitably be among that large percentage of his male contemporaries who die before they reach full maturity - not necessarily quickly or easily.

Under such circumstances, when the option exists, it is obviously better that he should remain as a pet, and, from what I have seen

as possums, he would probably be an exceedingly happy little animal - provided he was castrated, i.e. `cut proud', before his first season. The two overriding preoccupations of male possums are food and sex, and the order is reversed in the mating season. If he remains entire, he will leave, fit or not, when the scent of the female over the hill becomes irresistible, and if he's physically prevented from leaving, he's likely to damage himself trying, or, at the very least, suffer acutely.

Castrated, he would be in much the same situation as a neutered tom cat. There would be moments when he was a trifle bored, and wanted something he couldn't quite understand, but essentially he would remain a baby all his life. If, as in the particular case I have in mind, he were in the charge of doting humans, who indulged his whims, forgave his solecisms, and gave him the run of the house and plenty of affection and company, he would probably be an extremely happy - baby, not a possum. But the only sort of possum he could have been was a dead one.

Under these circumstances it is not necessarily cruel to keep the animal alive - it could be ecstatically happy! Male possums, particularly baby male possums, are nature's own experts in extracting the maximum amount of enjoyment from any given situation, and when their minds aren't on Women, with a capital, their main concerns are rare food and how to get it, trees and places to play, and, with suburbanite males at least, non-possum attention and admiration. At one and the same time demanding babies, but easy enough to please.

But NOT, in heaven's name, in a ten-by-six cage out in the back yard. It is quite extraordinary the number of people who think that possums, when they aren't in the middle of some vaguely imagined sanctuary, miraculously free from feral dogs and cats, with only the odd dingo to worry about, should be in a cage, by no means always as generous in size as six-by-ten. The same people would, nevertheless, be horrified at the idea of keeping a cat under those conditions. Yet space to move is even more basic and vital in the case of a possum than it is with a cat - ideally it's a matter of acres, not feet. Possums are possums, and no other animals. But if a facile equation must be made, then they are much, much more like cats than they are like budgerigars.

Obviously this solution applies to only one case in thousands. I am writing with a particular case in mind, the <u>only</u> one I have ever come across, in which it was a matter of the right humans and the right animal miraculously coming together, something to make one pleased that the world hasn't run out of happy endings, not something at which pedantic purists should point the finger. Essentially, it was a private, *ad hoc* arrangements between individuals, one that happened to work. The possum lorded it over half the house and a considerable proportion of a large garden. A cage is no proper place for a bushy-tail, except when it has to be hospitalized for a few days. The only viable alternative for a baby, if it's physically incapable of leading a normal life, is the one in question, the life of a pet, the sort of pet who is a member of the family, and treated as such.

And a possum Peter Pan is not the easiest of animals to live with. Snoopy, at that mental age, was physically incapable of getting above floor level, but she was equipped with four very dextrous little hands, and a thoroughly enquiring snout. Nothing within her range was safe from her attentions. House-training is problematical, since it is directly contrary to their own physiological make-up, not to mention psychology: it's very difficult to achieve, puts a strain on both parties, and is likely to be imperfect. Bright lights hurt a possum's eyes - possum light-sight is like human night-sight: with practice it improves to the point where the possum can see comfortably in half-light, but if the house lighting isn't kept to a

minimum, then the possum still finds itself more or less confined to dark corners.

In other words, it's like having a human toddler with special disabilities, at the active, curious stage, and perennially remaining there. It's completely out of the question for anyone who has any respect at all for their furniture, or any tendency to value any of their inanimate possessions above the convenience, let alone welfare, of the animal. It's a solution you try as a last resort, out of love for the particular animal, not something to be deliberately sought as desirable.

And I must stress that if and when such situations occur, a decision as to the permanent future of the baby must be made at the earliest possible moment, and that castration is absolutely necessary in the case of a male. There is no such thing as `always' where possums are concerned, but it's a million to one that a little boy, no matter how attached to you he may be, and no matter how unwilling he is to leave in moments of conscious thought, will suddenly one night grow up into a young adult male, who cannot help going off after the nearest irresistible female, and after her the next, and so on. I doubt whether it would be practical to induce enough females to visit him in his abode to satisfy his new and overwhelming appetite; in any case, unless his disability was caused by injury, it would probably be undesirable from an ecological point of view, at least until more is known about possum complaints, so that one can be certain whether or not the youngster's problem is hereditary. Females generally produce one, at most two, babies per year, but a male can, and often does, sire a whole crop.

There would be some leeway in the case of a female baby in the same situation; it might be possible to defer the final decision until it is clear whether, as with Snoopy, the main lasting trouble is that the early problems delayed her proper development, while still allowing her to mature sexually on schedule, and whether, if kept out of trouble during her first mating season, she can make up enough lost ground to live at least a partially normal life. Missing one mating season, while undesirable, is not as great a hardship as it would be for a male, since the female's sexual desire is acute for only a few days, twice a year, in spring and autumn.

If a mating does take place the baby can be vetted, so that any genetic damage to the species is avoided - Snoopy, for example, had six known descendants, down to her great-grandson, without any sign of her own troubles showing up, so presumably either her problems were not hereditary, or if they were, were capable of being cancelled out by crossing with another family. But if anything had gone wrong, it was still within my power to right the situation, since all the possums concerned remained within reach.

And I must stress, once again, how rarely such a situation would occur. I can think, off-hand, of only two sorts of defect in a baby that would justify such as step: a severe disability of the hind legs, which in turn affects almost every aspect of possum life, and total or near-total blindness - in a baby that is. An established adult who becomes nearly blind in later years can still lead a normal life, provided part of its sight remains, and provided <u>it</u> remains in its known surroundings. Such a one poked a hopeful head through my window, right on cue, with her current baby trailing behind her - her fourth since her sight was seriously impaired - as I was drafting this paragraph. (Hence the quick change of direction.)

If there is any possibility at all of the baby remaining with its own mother, even if it is injured, it should do so, in the best interests of everyone concerned, possum and human. A case in point occurred at Newport, while I was living at Ingleside.

TWIDDY & BATTERED BABY

Jedda, Foxy's eldest daughter, produced a very undersized daughter slightly out of season. My mother hadn't got past calling her the twiddly, as she was so very tiny by comparison with the other youngsters of that season, when she herself became pregnant before she was even six months old.

Her tiny baby had no option but to come out of the pouch before she was properly furred, since Twiddy's pouch simply wasn't big enough to hold her any longer. Twiddy was still only about a third her adult size, and to add to her problems she took after the Foxy line, so her potential adult size was not in any case very great. My mother assisted all she could with extra food, so that she wouldn't have to carry what, for her, was an enormous burden too far each night.

Then, one evening, the baby appeared with one ear lacerated, and a badly lacerated tail. The next night, both ear and tail were brown and dead. And the next night, no ear, no tail - just a little stump of a tail, like a rabbit's scut.

Twiddy showed signs of abandoning the impossible task, but my mother persisted, making her call her baby by repeating, `Where's your bub, Twid' - a sequence of sounds which some of the Foxy possums knew, learning it mother to daughter - whenever Twiddy showed signs of leaving it. She continued to give her extra food, retrieving the baby when little Twiddy was routed by the bigger possums, keeping it safe and returning it to its mother as soon as all was quiet.

Battered Baby became the plumpest, sleekest, healthiest-looking possum in the group. She remained undersized for some time, and followed in her mother's footsteps by showing signs of pregnancy before she was fully grown. But a more robust, vivacious little possum you could hardly hope to meet.

She lost her first baby at an early stage, before her pouch was markedly distended, something which happens quite frequently and in this case was probably all to the good. Indeed, she produced no surviving offspring until she reached full size - full Jenny-poss size, forsooth. She had some difficulty managing, without a prehensile tail to give her extra grip where necessary, but her difficulties were so obvious (unlike, for example, Snoopy's) that they elicited such help as she needed, not only from us. For her problem was unmistakable. She was, in features, one of the most beautiful of the possums, and when she sat with her tail concealed and the remaining ear towards you, you couldn't help but admire her. When she around, the effect was almost as much bathos as pathos.

She managed to persuade some of our neighbours that she needed a woodshed, furnished with a special fruitbox, to live in, handily located near the fence-line so that she could enjoy our hospitality as well as theirs. And her rotundity suggested that we may not have been the only people whose help she enlisted.

Battered Baby retained the use of her back legs, and so could hang on to her mother's back, which Snoopy could not. Twiddy could feed Baby, but Jenny could not feed Snoopy. There was no other way for Snoopy but the way we went, and I could not have kept her alive during the first four weeks without Jenny's assistance. It was Jenny who made the first decision, Snoopy herself who made the main one. But Battered Baby stands as a monument to the principle that where such factors do not apply, even in a very extreme case the best solution for everyone is still for the baby to remain with its own mother, if there is any possibility at all that she can raise it, with human assistance if necessary.

PART II
SNOOPY

1. The Baby who Shouldn't have Lived.

Jenny's Baby

On September the ninth, 1970, Jenny's new baby appeared on her back. It was the most peculiar baby I had ever seen, and it was riding backwards, looking over her rump, not in the least like a proper little possum cuddled up against her neck. I went inside and told my mother that Jenny had given birth to a red-and-white greyhound pup. She suggested that Jenny, being Jenny, had been playing around with a ring-tail. It was the oddest looking baby we'd ever seen, so we gave it an odd name, Snoopy.

We didn't see much of Snoopy that night. Like a lot of babies, she took one look at the big wide world, and tried to scramble back into the pouch. But she didn't really fit, and there were lots of bits and pieces, legs and a tail, left out. Jenny was always rather stand-offish unless exigencies dictated otherwise, so we'd got into the habit of feeding her up a tree, with a flexible plastic dish screwed to a piece of doweling, so she didn't have to come closer to us than she wanted to. Consequently we didn't get much of a look at the new baby, who made only brief, or partial, appearances on the next two nights.

Late on the third evening, however, I was coming back from one of my rare visits to Sally's haunts when I heard what sounded like a little bird cheeping in a bush near the house. A quick torch flash revealed Jenny, sitting on a low branch. Possums are partial to egg, on occasion, and, I suspect, would raid birds' nests once in a while if no other source was available to a possum who developed such a fad. So I decided to see what the infamous Jenny was up to now.

Lying on the ground under the bush, unable to move, even to lift her nose out of the dirt, was Snoopy. Nothing worked except her lungs.

While I'd dramatically revised my earlier opinion that possums were mindless balls of fluff, I still considered Jenny a feather-headed, pretty little flirt. She'd mislaid Joey, she left Twiddly crying in the roof while she went coquettishly off with two males at once, having already had a different lover the previous night, and now here she was, calmly sitting up a tree while her baby died on the ground below. I'd had Jenny, and told her so in no uncertain terms and tone.

She came down and demonstrated the problem. She nosed the baby, trying to get it on to her back, but it was unable to respond. There was simply nothing she could do. Possums don't have a convenient scruff of the neck so that the mother can carry them with her mouth. The only way she can carry her baby is in her pouch or on her back, and to get to either of those places the baby has to make an effort of its own. And Snoopy couldn't move anything.

All Jenny could do under the circumstances was keep watch over her, hoping she would revive enough to get on. In this case it would have been a death-watch. Snoopy was red and white, not because of the colouration of her fur, as we thought, but because she was, in possum terms, naked. Baby possums have their proper fur long before they make their first public appearance, their official birthday. Snoopy had no real fur at all. The red was sparse patches of short thin red hair, like that of elderly males, on the top part of her body; the white was skin. There was no covering at all on the underside, and she was icy cold. In the chill spring night she was simply freezing to death.

I picked her up and put her on Jenny's back. Jenny started up the tree, and as soon as her back tilted to go up, the baby fell off.

Snoopy couldn't even close her hands enough to form a fist, and had no way of clinging whatsoever. Jenny stopped on the lowest branch, and looked back. I picked the baby up and tried again. She lay across Jenny's back while Jenny stayed still, but as soon as Jenny moved, she fell off on to the ground again.

It was just no go. Jenny was used to my taking Twiddly for short walks - I'd always show her that I had him, and make it as clear as I could, by pantomime and gesture, that I was only borrowing him for a little while; after the first couple of times she understood what this meant, that I'd look after him and bring him back, and ceased to watch us anxiously as we moved away, coming to investigate only if I kept him too long. I asked her now, in the same way, if I could borrow Snoopy for a while, then put her under my jumper and took her back to the house to revive her. Jenny watched anxiously, but made no attempt to follow.

When I first put her under my jumper, Snoopy was still alive, though icy cold. I could feel her little front hands digging into me, frantically trying to cling to me. But she grew rapidly weaker, and by the time I got some milk warmed up she seemed to very definitely dead. She was quite cold and limp, eyes closed, with no perceptible heartbeat. I tried anyway, forcing milk into her mouth, drop at a time. She couldn't really swallow, but some managed to get down the right way, and she started to show signs of life.

I warmed her and fed her and gradually she recovered consciousness. When she started to gain a little strength and move feebly I took her back to Jenny, who was still sitting on the same branch, and very relieved to see her.

This time Snoopy managed to hold on for a little while, even when Jenny moved. Her back legs didn't work at all, but she could grip with her front hands, and did so, desperately. However, the night air took its toll, and she gradually became colder and weaker, and eventually fell off. I replaced her, and the same thing happened again. The process was repeated several times, with Snoopy holding on for progressively shorter periods. At the end of ten minutes we were back where we started, with Snoopy on the ground, frozen and unable to move anything.

It just wasn't on. When speaking to possums, or any other animal for that matter, I always try to make sense, not from any fond belief that they can understand more than a few key words, but because they are very sensitive to tone, and to get the right tone into my own voice I have to make sense to myself. I told Jenny that I'd have to keep the baby overnight, and instructed her to come and pick it up in the morning, when she was going to bed.

To say that the result startled me is the understatement of all times.

I took Snoopy back inside and revived her again, the same way. It was still touch and go, since she couldn't retain her own body heat for very long, and became cold, and with it weak. I had to keep watching her, and keep in constant physical contact, and take steps to warm her as soon as she started to become cold.

It was not a time for scruples. I simply took her straight to the bed as soon as I acquired a supply of milk.

It was then that I first really got a good look at her, and matters were even worse than they'd seemed. `Literally a skeleton, covered only by skin' is an overworked cliché, but in this case it was actually true. Her whole frame was visible, with no flesh at all. Little possums are supposed to be pyramidal, with a well-covered rump as the largest part of the body. Snoopy was the reverse. The widest, heaviest part of her body

was her skull, and she tapered backwards from there. She had pelvic bones, not a rump.

I don't know what the ultimate cause of her problems was. I didn't, for reasons which I'll explain, take her to a vet. But the immediate cause of almost all her problems was clear: no dinner; none at all. And with it, of course, every vitamin deficiency in the book, since no dinner means no vitamins of any kind.

When I first brought her in, I'd said, `I don't think I can save this one, it's too young.' The overall impression was that she was embryonic. That was a guess at the time, but I have since seen undeveloped babies during their first few weeks in the pouch, and, apart from size, that was pretty much the general impression she gave.

But she was not that young: there was something desperately wrong with her development. In many respects she was more developed than Joey when he first arrived. Her skeletal frame was noticeably larger, too large in fact for her to fit in her mother's pouch; her eyes already had defined pupils with an iris; she had a full set of teeth.

I'd learned from Joey that little possums grow dramatically, in spurts, different things growing at different times. First the frame grows, to half again its previous size, within a few days. Then it takes about twice as long for the rest to catch up, and recover proper proportions. Or the teeth grow, all at once. Or the ears. And so forth. What it looked like was that she had been completely starved during certain critical periods when certain things were supposed to develop. But that's just a guess.

To add to her problems, there was a gaping great hole where the right side of her rump should have been. It was the size and shape of the bite of a large possum. After events suggested the identity of the `criminal'. Not Jenny. On something Snoopy's size the wound was very large indeed. It had, thank heaven, missed her spine: her tail did work, just a little. Her back legs were effectively dead, and there may have been some muscular damage, but the problem there lay essentially with her general weakness. As I was afterwards to discover, when a possum becomes weak, the first thing to go is the hind legs.

Quite frankly, it looked hopeless. But I felt I owed it to Jenny to have a go. She'd already made it clear with Twiddly that when she let me borrow him she expected me to look after him - in fact she entrusted him to my care. And now she had entrusted me with Snoopy.

That first night I didn't do much but keep her warm and let her sleep. I fed her every few hours, though not as frequently as I'd fed Joey, because once she warmed up, and what had been plain unconsciousness turned into a more natural sleep, it seemed the best thing for her, and I didn't want to disturb her.

Punctually at dawn, Jenny came to my window.

I presume Jenny must have worked things out for herself. She'd been unable to cope with the baby herself, outside the nest. I'd taken it, so it would still be with me. She knew where I was to be found at that time of night, and knew I'd previously had a baby possum, hers, with me in my room. So she tried to find her baby there, and when she got close enough her nose confirmed her surmise. She didn't understand my actual words. I hope.

I woke the baby, and put her on her mother's back. She could hold on a little, with her front hands, and I hoped she'd be able to make it back into the nest. In fact she fell off on to the ground three times in the fifty foot journey from my room to Jenny's nest at the end of the house.

Each time I retrieved her, each time Jenny came down to me and I put her

back on Jenny's back. Finally, as I could tell from the sound effects, Jenny and Snoopy managed to get into the nest.

I was prepared for a repeat performance the next night, if necessary - by now it was beginning to dawn on me that I had in fact been baby-sitting Twiddly. But Jenny appeared without Snoopy.

I was worried, and looked under the house, and heard the thin, soft piping. Snoopy was lying on the ground unable to move.

The ground under the house is no place for a baby like that. There is no way a cat could be expected to know that it is not a rat. Jenny had apparently intended to leave Snoopy in the nest, but Snoopy had tumbled down between the walls.

I tried to help Snoopy back up into the wall - there was at that stage no way I myself could gain access to the nest, as Jenny had moved her position slightly since she had Twiddly. Snoopy made weak attempts to climb, utterly futile. Her pitiful exertions simply exhausted her so much that we were back to first base again, with her cold and unable to move.

Jenny came back in, with obviously hostile intent. She wanted to know what I was doing with her baby. I tried to put Snoopy on her back, hoping she would ferry her back to the nest, but Snoopy had already exhausted all her energy. Jenny's hostile attitude gradually changed, first to concern, then to understanding. I was at that stage lying under the house. Jenny could have taken my face off. But, given a chance, she worked out the situation for herself. She went back outside, and watched as I took Snoopy back into the house.

If there was any doubt about Jenny's ability to feed Snoopy, it was pretty well resolved now. She didn't look as if she had had anything at all since I last fed her. So, I started all over again.

And, at dawn, Jenny arrived at my window. I put Snoopy on her back and off she went, but with the same result as the previous morning. This time, when I collected Snoopy off the ground, I showed Jenny I had her and took her back to my room. If Snoopy was going to fall out of the nest and be unable to climb back to safety, then she'd simply have to stay with me for a few days, until she was stronger.

We tried again the next morning, when Jenny came to pick her up, but it was obvious that it still no go.

It was clear now that it was going to be some time before Snoopy could go back to Jenny on a permanent basis. So in the meantime I just had to do the best I could. I didn't really consider taking her to the vet, because it seemed hopeless. I had some free medical advice, and supplies of vitamins from a human doctor, but, quite simply, no one really expected the baby to survive. If there were to be any chance, it seemed to lie in getting her back to her own mother - hand-rearing a healthy, robust little baby like Joey was one thing, but it didn't really seem viable for Snoopy. Just the necessary handling involved, which, because of the difference in physical equipment, had to be tougher than that she would receive from her mother, would put an extra strain on her. And she was in no condition to cope with any strain.

I considered putting her out of her misery, but two things held me back.

First, quite frankly, I wouldn't have known how to face Jenny, next time she came asking for her baby.

Secondly, Snoopy herself made a kind of declaration.

On the afternoon of the third day I had to go out for a few hours. I left Snoopy alone, sleeping in the bed with the electric blanket on, much more than I did with Joey - Snoopy was not conscious of her surroundings for the most part - all she could do was breathe - and so it

seemed better to subject her to the necessary roughness of my presence only when it was vital. However, on this occasion I asked my mother to check on her a couple of times while I was out.

The first two times she didn't even stir. But the third time my mother looked, there was a tiny weenie little hiss. That was a little female possum in there, conscious of her own surroundings and unwilling to have her privacy and her comfort disturbed.

Furthermore, the misery she should have been put out of wasn't that great. For most of the time she was quite comfortably asleep. When she was awake, except when I made the mistake of letting her get too cold, she was in fact a very cheerful little poss. Where other possums her age played elaborate gymnastic games, she could only manage, with difficulty, a few feeble movements, but to her they too were play, and she clearly enjoyed them in the same way that the others delighted in their own agility. About the first thing she did when she could spare energy from just breathing was to launch a furious attack on the toggle of my duffle coat, and in play fights, she went on from there. She was a real little female possum.

I'd been feeling guilty about her name - it was given to her because she looked so funny, but we hadn't realised why she looked so funny. But it was pretty much a *fait accompli* by that time.

So I started calling her Tiger as the most frequent of her pet names - I'd called Joey Tiger, too, and I'd sworn I'd never use that name as a love-name for Another Possum. At first I called her Tiger in irony, half-amused at the fury with which this minute creature attacked whatever inanimate object she cared to appoint the enemy for the moment. But in the end she was Tiger for real; her courage, if not her physical condition earned her the name. It remained a private name between us, and she knew it quite well. I called her Snoopy, and other people called her Snoopy, and she knew the name both as a call and when used without the calling intonation. But Tiger was her name for the sleep ritual she came to require before going to bed, and Tiger was her name when I petted her or comforted her.

In the end, I left the decision as to whether she would live or die up to her. I went through the same motions I'd gone through with Joey, but in a rather perfunctory manner, responding to each crisis as seemed best, but without, as they say, striving officiously to keep alive. For nearly a week I continually expected her not to wake out of one of her deep sleeps. But she always did. Even then, she was in love with life, and extracted every last ounce of pleasure out of what life she had.

When I'd had her a week, it became clear that she intended to live. She could stand, though she couldn't hold her head up without it wobbling, and she could stagger a few steps. She had a little more hair - not fur - and there was some movement in her back legs, though she still couldn't make a proper fist with her hind hands. Compared with what she started with, that was a miraculous `recovery'. It was then that the first photo of her was taken - before that I just hadn't wanted to preserve the memory of a little animal who wanted so much to live, but didn't stand a chance.

In the meantime, Jenny had adjusted to the situation. She started coming to my room in the evening, then when the routine settled down, at about midnight. At first she came straight in on to the bed; I'd wake the baby, take her out from under the bedcover, and give her to Jenny. Jenny would wash her, clean her bowels, Snoopy would make futile attempts to suckle, and I'd get Snoopy's food and give it to her in Jenny's presence. Jenny would remain, and watch everything I did.

Since I had Jenny there, I took advantage of her knowledge, and

consulted her about everything I did. That's neither as ridiculous nor as complicated as it sounds. I simply showed Jenny every sort of food I was giving Snoopy - since there were obvious vitamin deficiencies I'd added things like soft boiled egg, tomato and carrot to the usual menu. Jenny would sniff, taste a little, and approve.

The only difficulty came when I offered her some of Snoopy's milk. Technology, or whatever, in fact played a decisive role in saving Snoopy; while both spoon and eye-dropper proved ineffective at first, since she herself was too weak to swallow properly, and the milk went everywhere except where it should, on the second day I discovered a sort of toy baby doll's bottle that's a miniature of the real thing, and needs only to have the nipple pricked to make it work. It enabled me to be more directional in my efforts, and squirt milk into the proper part of her mouth when she herself was too weak to do anything to the purpose.

When I showed Jenny the bottle, she went into a Must Have reaction of her own, and tried to eat it, bottle and all. That was the only time she didn't behave as I wanted, in fact giving me her opinion of what I was feeding the baby without attempting to eat it all herself. Jenny was pregnant again, and after that I gave her a little milk of her own, partially to encourage her to keep coming and washing the baby, mostly because I hoped, most unscientifically I'm sure, to avoid another disaster like Snoopy.

I took the hint from Jenny that the baby needed cleaning - despite my best efforts most of the food and milk went on her, not in her. I tried sponging her with cotton wool and warm water, lights out, in front of the radiator. She could toddle a few steps, and was delighted to play, to the best of her ability, in the warm dark situation. But try as I might, I couldn't keep her warm and dry enough afterwards, and she kept getting cold. I tried a baby's toothbrush as a hairbrush, hoping to stimulate fur growth. Snoopy responded with weak grooming movements of her own - she kicked one hind leg in the appropriate manner, but didn't have enough control to bring it to bear on her body, so she kicked only the air.

I consulted Jenny about the brush, too. At first she didn't quite get the idea. She tried to nibble it when I presented it to her, and opined that it tasted terrible. I demonstrated its use on her own body, and now she understood. She gave a snort of disgust, and, with body and face, very clearly said, `Hmph. Well it won't do any good, but I don't suppose it will do much harm, either.'

Jenny was quite right, of course. None of my attempts to clean the baby met with much success.

Joey had already been able to groom himself when he arrived, and hadn't needed the bowel cleaning activities of his mother. Snoopy was obviously a different matter, and Jenny and I gradually evolved a system.

After the first few nights it became evident that Jenny really didn't like coming into the light, so she would come to the window, a casement, and sit on top of it. I would hold Snoopy up to her, and she would wash the baby, placing her own hands on top of mine and guiding them to turn the baby over as required. [xviii] Then, weather and Snoopy's condition permitting, she would take her for a ride through the nearby trees, until Snoopy fell off, head heaviest so head first, on to the ground or stone below. At first Jenny came racing down to retrieve her. Later, when she found that I was following, and often located Snoopy by her crying before she could get down the tree, she would wait for me to collect Snoopy and return her. When I thought Snoopy had had enough punishment for one night, I'd hold her up to Jenny, make sure she knew I had her, then take her back inside. Or when Jenny had had enough for the night, she would wait

until she saw that I had Snoopy safe, then go off through the trees.

It was a very good system. Jenny couldn't feed Snoopy, or keep her warm; I couldn't wash her, or take her for a ride through the trees. So we each did what we could, and arrived at a fair division of labour.

Snoopy at first knew that Jenny was her mother, and I was not. The first two times she was awake enough to know what was going on when Jenny came and attended to her, she cried bitterly when Jenny left, and tried to crawl after her. Nothing I could do could console her, and she cried herself to sleep. Jenny, too, wanted Snoopy - on one occasion I had put Snoopy on her back and they were going out for their walk when I suddenly realised that it was too wet and cold outside. It was a very bad thing to do, changing my mind like that, but I had no alternative other than to pluck her, clinging as she was with both front hands, from Jenny's back. Jenny turned around and looked longingly at her, then turned her pleading eyes on me. But in the end she accepted my decision and left. She knew very well that this baby couldn't survive in the ordinary conditions of the possum world.

Snoopy, meanwhile, had adjusted to having two mothers - she objected, as all little possums do, to having her bowels cleaned out by Jenny, and it helped attach her to me. She had to put up with a lot of things that other little possums didn't, but she had one unheard-of luxury. She didn't have to be left alone all night while her mother went somewhere she couldn't go. She had other luxuries, too - human food that she was already beginning to appreciate, a nice warm bed with an electric blanket, and love and attention from two mothers. She revelled in it.

For the first few nights I left her in the bed while I went to feed the others, but then tried taking her out with me on my rounds, putting her briefly on my shoulder, but for the most part keeping her in my coat pocket to avoid her getting cold. Her advent caused the others no real surprise. I suppose they must have decided I was in some way female, because I fed them The older ones were in any case inured to the sight of me with a baby possum on my shoulder, and I presume the younger ones took their cue from them. At any rate they simply accepted the situation, provided I didn't actually bring her into physical contact with them.

At the time my great possum friend was Mrs. Poss. Jenny and I were colleagues, each independently trying to look after the baby as best she could, communicating only with great difficulty, mainly by just performing the actions we intended, clearly, slowly, in full view of the other, until the other side of the cross-species co-operation worked out what it was all about. But, although there was a growing understanding between us, there was no real friendship, as there was with old Mrs. Poss.

Mrs. Poss was also the gentlest and most maternal possum among my acquaintances. She herself had Pom on her back at this stage, so I naively wandered up to her and put Snoopy under her nose, `Look, Mrs. Poss. I've got one too.'

She reacted very strongly, nipping Snoopy fiercely. That was Someone Else's Baby, not hers. I hastily put Snoopy back in my pocket and proceeded to mollify Mrs. Poss. But Mrs. Poss was the last in the line, and that, plus the attack, sent Snoopy back into cold, frozen unconsciousness. I had to race her back to the house and go through the old revival technique.

After that I kept a very close watch on Snoopy's condition outside, keeping her outings brief and taking her inside at the slightest sign of cold. And out of range of all possums but Jenny.

By now the penny had finally dropped that Jenny did, indeed, appreciate the situation, and that she was trying to do all she could for

Snoopy. So when she first came out at night to be fed, I took Snoopy with me and gave her to her. Jenny would wash her, then Snoopy would scramble on to her back and behave like any other little possum while Jenny had her hand-out, except that she had no interest in the human-provided handouts outside - she got hers inside. As she became physically more capable, she would start tiny exploration trips on her own, never more than a few inches from Jenny. Then Jenny would finish her food and start to move off. Snoopy would scramble aboard, sometimes with a leg-up from me. Jenny would take her for a short ride in adjacent trees, progressively further and further, but slowly enough for me to keep up on the ground. When Snoopy fell off, as she invariably did, I would retrieve her and return her to Jenny. In other words, much the same as the late night routine.

The process would continue until Jenny had had enough, or I thought Snoopy had. Then Jenny would wait up the top of the tree, I'd hold Snoopy up to her to show her I had her, then take her back inside. And Jenny would show up at my window later in the evening, for a repeat performance.

It was very rugged on Snoopy, and each time she came crashing down on her head - since it was still the heaviest part of her anatomy she always fell head first - I was terrified she'd fracture her skull or suffer brain damage. Being a possum, she never did. It sounds very cruel to have let it happen, yet it was something I felt had to be, if Snoopy were to survive.

Furthermore, she herself wanted to do it, and obviously enjoyed it - until she got into difficulties and fell off. I can only explain it in terms of something I myself experienced as a child, which, *mutatis mutandis*, will probably ring a bell with everyone. When I was small, my father would take me out in the surf on his back to shoot the bigger waves. I loved the exhilaration, but was terrified and hated what happened when, inevitably, I fell off and got left behind. I couldn't swim well enough to cope by myself, and lived through an eternity, swallowing water and being dumped, each time, until my father came back to collect me. Yet I didn't stop loving the exhilaration, and always begged and pleaded to be taken out again, if not that day, then the next. I never did learn to swim well enough to go out on my own, so as I grew older I began to decide that there were more pleasant ways of spending my time than being battered and half-drowned. Ultimately, I confined my surfing activities to a deepish channel inshore from the sandbar which regularly forms at the local beach; the water is gentler there, and assistance is available from the beach if necessary. So I limited my surfing activities to picking up the small waves which broke again after crossing the bar, getting as much of the pleasant aspects, with as little of the unpleasant ones, as I could.

Snoopy was very much like that in regard to outside possum activities.

Snoopy was, in fact, making great strides, considering where she started from. But she was at an age when little possums do their most rapid and dramatic growing, and she had, at the same time, to try to make up for lost ground. She couldn't do both at once successfully, and it didn't help that, ask her skeleton indicated, she'd been intended for a largish possum, like her mother.

Then there was the father to consider, too. She had enormous ears, even longer, proportionally than Jenny's. Once her face-markings developed, there was no real doubt as to the paternity. She had a modified Jenny-mark - the chevron and stripe were there, but the chevron was filled in with black, and she had slanting, black, `eyebrows' and very black, heavily marked lentoid `eye-liner', so that in later years, when seen at the

top of a tree, from some angles she appeared to have a little dark face. The red, thin hair helped the general impression, but even allowing for that, as fortuitous colouration caused by an abnormality, there wasn't much doubt. There was only one possum like her in the whole pack. It was a miniature Mephistopheles we had on our hands.

As she improved, she needed less of the attentions provided by Jenny. She was starting to groom herself, her bowels were in working order, and she could scramble a few inches along a branch, outside, with my assistance and support. Inside she was starting to walk fairly freely, and scamper a little, weakly. She began to explore the room, a few feet at a time, finding it, like any young possum, all very interesting and exciting. She could play stationary games which didn't require her to walk or stand for too long, worrying clothes, bedclothes and so forth like a little puppy. She still spent most of her time asleep, but when she was awake she was as vivacious a little possum as you could hope to meet.

And as she improved, Jenny, of her own accord, gradually stopped coming to visit her at night, confining her maternal activities to the period when I took Snoopy out to meet her when she came out of her nest, early in the evening.

After Joey lost his mother for the second time, I'd learnt my lesson, and made sure he knew his way back to the window. To make it a bit easier, I'd placed a plank against the outside of the window sill, so that it inclined to it at an angle of about forty-five degrees. It was, in fact, a joke - a normal possum, particularly a young one, would hardly notice the difference from the horizontal, as I later came to find out. From the time Snoopy could stagger even a few steps, I brought her back through the window.

As I had done with Joey, I put her on the bottom of the plank, went in myself, and called her. She just sat there and pleaded to be picked up.

The climbing motion is in fact a series of kangaroo-type bounds up the trunk of the tree. The thrust comes from the hind legs. Snoopy could haul herself up one step with her front arms, but in order to take the next step, she had to take hold with her back legs, then push with them, to get her arms into the next position. If she could do that, she could repeat the process, hauling herself up to bring her back legs to her front legs, using her arms instead of her hind legs as the main locomotive power.

But her back legs didn't function even enough for that. It was a physical impossibility. She stayed there until she froze and fell off. I went out, picked her up, and put her back on the plank. The same thing happened. She stuck there till she froze and grew too weak to hold on, then fell off on the ground. I went out, brought her in, and comforted her.

And tried again the next night. Snoopy simply had to be able to get in that window to survive. I knew from experience with Joey that I couldn't guarantee that she wouldn't be separated from me outside. She could be in a bush, and I could be standing right beside her, and there would be a flurry of possums, things going in all directions too quickly for me to follow, and she would have disappeared. And I wouldn't be able to find her. She could, if she had to, crawl back to the window, inch by inch, taking all night if necessary, but if she stuck there she was gone. If nothing else happened first, she would, in her current state of possum nakedness, freeze to death in a couple of hours, with me still looking for her outside. She had to be able to come in that window.

The result was the same the next night, but I kept trying every night, except when it rained. I varied the process by staying outside with her to protect her, encouraging her, offering a little physical help from

behind where necessary, sometimes even taking her in my hand and walking her up the plank. But it didn't work, so I kept on trying the other way, her outside on the plank, me inside.

I didn't stop to analyse the situation at the time, I just went by feel, but that physical situation was the one which brought every possible emotional pressure to bear on her, and it was the one which counted. She was outside, frightened and cold, getting more frightened and colder every second. At that stage she would automatically try to go to her mother anyway, if separated by only a couple of feet, and she was also in the stage of blind, unquestioning obedience. She would come to the signal she recognised as her mother's call, at once. I was above her, reaching down towards her, calling her, only such a little way above her. A few inches and she would be out of the cold. A few inches and she would be safe. `Kimmon Snoopy.' A few inches and she would be back with her mother, who would hold her, and caress her, and warm her and take her to bed, and not let anything happen to her. `Come on Tiger, you can do it.'

She pleaded and called, and cried and looked at me with desperation. And tried and tried and tried and couldn't do it. She broke my heart. Night after night I had to take pity on her and go and get her. But she had to try first. She had to make an effort.

And eventually, one night, she did it. She took the second step. The first step was a false movement, one which didn't lead to anything. It was the second step which counted.

She fell off then, to be sure, but she'd made the breakthrough. A couple of nights later she managed three steps, and after that she managed more them quickly. Her progress was uneven, and terribly, terribly slow, but the time came when she climbed the whole plank herself. She couldn't repeat the performance immediately, but she'd done what was necessary.

As it started to come more easily, she started to enjoy it. Other little possums her age perform gymnastics for the pure joy of it, for the satisfaction of performing them well. And, like all kids of any species, they love applause, human or otherwise. Snoopy too enjoyed climbing for the sake of doing it successfully, and she proudly demonstrated her achievements to me, and revelled in my praise and encouragement. The other little possums were performing totally unnecessary gyrations and flourishes with complete ease; Snoopy, with great effort, performed the first steps towards the basic essentials. My praise was always genuine.

As the way up the plank became easier, she started to make tiny investigatory trips of her own - the bed, the window ledge next to the open window, the window itself, and the plank. She started scampering, weakly, but still a joyous baby scamper, up and down the plank.

The great night finally arrived when she went down the plank, disappeared for a minute, then came back with pride and delight written all over her very few inches. In her mouth she bore an enormous lantana leaf, her own size. It was a gesture only, unreal in terms of practical implications, but she had gone out by herself, got her own food, and brought it back in successfully.

Whether because of that or otherwise, lantana thereafter became one of the things that had to be on offer as part of her dinner. Her first approach to her dinner, both the human part and the leaves, was to investigate it thoroughly to make sure everything that should be there was. There were certain key things which had to be on offer - milk, a glace cherry in her dish of human food, lantana in each of the three vases or buckets of leaves. She didn't in fact always eat it, any more than she always ate the cherry or drank the milk. But it's absence would produce a

very disappointed possum, who would turn and look up at me, ears drooping and muscles sagging. `Aw.' So there always was, unless circumstances completely prevented it, lantana among the leaves.

About the same time there was a breakthrough outside. Her climbing had been improving, not so much in actual effect as in the closer approach of her movements to the right ones for the situation. She celebrated being with me for four weeks by going eighteen inches up the trunk of a sapling under her own power. Of course, she fell off coming down.

The next night, when I gave her to Jenny to be washed, Jenny started biting her instead.

Even after that, Jenny still recognised her as her baby.

I still took her out when I fed Jenny, held her up and showed her to her from a distance. Jenny still waited for that before going off for the night. Once she had made the breakthrough on the sapling, Snoopy became ambitious, and soon started going up larger trees where Jenny and her neighbours got their handouts, while I was feeding them. She quickly showed that what I'd only suspected from Joey was true - large trees are easier than small trees, once you get up them. Like Joey, she headed straight for the biggest tree within her range. All I could do was distract the others where necessary, and collect what came tumbling down. (Up was one thing. Down was another. She had a choice of getting to a branch where she could reach my hand and walk down my arm to my shoulder, or falling down the last few feet.) On one occasion, however, she strayed into the thinner branches where Mephistopheles was busying himself.

Meph was a possum who possessed a very marked sense of curiosity, always with `What's in it for me?' at the back of his mind. He was very intrigued by this strange little creature. It smelt something like a possum, though a lot more of the house and the people who fed him, and it behaved a little like a possum. But it certainly didn't look like a possum, it looked more like a cross between a bush rat and a very weedy, very young puppy. He decided to investigate.

Meph's first question about anything new was, what does it smell like? His second was, what does it taste like? He satisfied himself on the first point, then followed trusting little Snoopy into the topmost branches, mouth opening to satisfy himself on the second. If I ever had any doubts about the origin of the hole in her rump, they were resolved now. The size of the mouth, hovering above her rump, and the personality, fitted too well.

By this time I'd started to climb the tree myself, hoping to intercept him. But they were already in the small branches up the top, where I couldn't go. Given the serious nature of the previous bite, it wasn't likely to be a quick nip with Snoopy falling safely to the ground. Possums hold on to what they are biting seriously with their front hands. In that sense, `meathooks' are just that. Meph, if he chose, was physically capable of holding Snoopy in mid air with his hands, at that stage. Things were looking pretty desperate.

Jenny, at this time, was several trees away, browsing, as always, after her handout, before she went off for the night. My eyes were on Snoopy and Meph, so I didn't notice her, until she came roaring back through the treetops, a magnificent young female racing to protect her baby. She disposed of Meph in no uncertain manner - he took off as if his putative father were chasing him, and Jenny followed at top speed, attacking him whenever she could reach him, across several trees, until he fled the vicinity completely, running for dear life.

In the meantime I managed to coax poor frightened little Snoopy down to me. I showed Jenny I had her, and that satisfied her. She relaxed,

and casually departed for the night.

Jenny, as we later discovered, always gave her babies a nudge towards independence at the earliest possible date. She had one baby after another, and had to make each do as much as it could for itself, as soon as it could, because of the demands of the next. When Snoopy was four weeks out of the pouch it was apparent that she, or I, could do what Jenny had been doing up to that point. She could groom herself a little, and, with my assistance, take a little exercise in the trees, going as far as Jenny had ever taken her. But Jenny's role throughout had been to do for the baby what I quite evidently could not. So, even a week or so after she had given Snoopy her nudge towards independence, at least from herself, she still came back and did what was necessary with Meph.

I have heard that in other situations mothers do cease to recognise their own babies after they have been taken away and cared for by humans for a few days. I can only suggest that the reason Jenny did not do this was because of her very special situation in regard to us. In a bush situation, a possum's family is herself and her current baby. But, as I said, possums, like all creatures, derive their personal smells in part from their surroundings and the food they eat. We thought Jenny lived in our roof. From her point of view, however, we lived in, or in immediate proximity to, her nest. The house smell, and our personal smells, formed part of the environment from which she derived her own smell, and that part of her olfactory world which was closest to her nest and so signified security. She was also fed, in part, on the same food that we ate, which in turn was a partial source of her, and our, personal scents, and also the same food Snoopy was getting. For prudence sake, I took Snoopy's leaves from those trees I saw Jenny and the others browsing in, so that that part of Snoopy's smell also fitted with what Jenny would expect of her own baby. In other words, from a nose-orientated possum point of view, we all had a lot in common, things which from Jenny's point of view would have tended to define `us' as opposed to `them'; if a possum can have an extended family, we were it; Snoopy was still part of `us'.

In these respects, the situation with Jenny was not very much like that with a wild mother and baby, or even with a mother who was in the habit of dropping in occasionally for a handout. It was more like, though still far from, the situation of a mother cat or dog living as a domestic pet.

Jenny was also an extremely intelligent possum. How intelligent, I do not know. I have never seen anything to equal her overall behaviour *vis-à-vis* Snoopy, but in all the possums I have known best, Joey, Meph, Erik, `Pumpkin' and above all Snoopy, I have seen isolated instances where they demonstrated intelligence of that order, but only where necessary. Jenny knew I had raised Joey, from, when not in, my room. She knew that I played with Twiddly, borrowing him on occasions, and she knew that he made expeditions into my room - she herself came infrequently to ask for food at my window. She also knew she couldn't care for Snoopy herself, that was only too apparent, but after I few nights it became evident that I could do so, except in certain respects, which desiderata she could and did supply. In other words, she came to grasp the situation, and, possum fashion, acted accordingly.

The crux of the matter, however, may well be not the presence or absence of our smell on the baby, but the presence or absence of the mother's own smell. We found that brief physical contact with us - for example a few seconds in the case of a baby scooped up off the ground and returned to its mother, or a few minutes with the rare baby who is willing, petting and playing with it - does not in the least impair the relationship

between mother and baby when the mother is one of our regulars. If I'm right, the only effect would be the same as if the baby had spent the period in a particularly odiferous local tree or shrub where its mother occasionally browsed. The mother could still smell her own scent on the baby, unless a very prolonged period of contact meant that it was completely masked, while her own scent was fading at the same time. Joey was out of contact with his mother for three days before she first put in an appearance. The weakening of her scent, together with the presence of my then not-so-familiar scent, and above all his own failure to recognise her, would all have combined to make Jenny react as she did on the earlier occasion.

Be that as it may, Jenny continued to know Snoopy as her own baby, while the other mothers considered her Someone Else's Baby, a semi-strange little possum. By the time she ceased to actually wash her, Snoopy's own personal scent, as well as her appearance, were familiar enough for Jenny to identify her as such.[xix]

Nevertheless, it was clear that Jenny now proposed to take a hand only where necessary, when a situation arose which I couldn't handle. Snoopy could move only clumsily, for short periods, before she tired herself out and went to sleep. She was still undeveloped - Foxy's contemporary daughter, Jedda, was two weeks younger than Snoopy, but in another month had overtaken and passed her, so that she was now twice Snoopy's size. Snoopy was still somebody's baby. And in view of Mrs. Poss's opinion, I didn't need three guesses whose baby she was.

I was going to have to finish the process myself.

I remember that at this point I put Snoopy up the same tree as Jedda, still not quite convinced that little possums didn't play with each other, and wanting Snoopy to learn by example, if she could. The comparison between the two was heartrending. Jedda, two thirds her age, was twice her size, and flew through the tree like a ring-tail, performing the most extraordinary feats with consummate ease. Compared with her, Snoopy didn't even look like a possum. I mean that literally. Someone unfamiliar with such animals would have taken them for two different species.

Jedda, of course, ignored Snoopy entirely, and played her own mad game with the tree. Snoopy, however, either got the idea, or Jedda was big enough to look like Mummy. She tried to follow her. Jedda would jump from one branch to the other. Snoopy, unable to do so, would start to follow laboriously, the long way round. No sooner had she got started in the right direction than Jedda was off again. I couldn't stand it. I collected Snoopy and took her inside.

A Possum with a Room

Inside was a different story. Snoopy was in her element. While her activities in the trees might be limited, inside she was as lively and happy and above all curious as Joey had ever been. However, she couldn't get off the ground much. Even the window ledge required me to put her there, or provide a bridge from the bed, when her attempts to jump showed that she wanted to go that way. The bed she could manage at quite an early stage. She couldn't jump up, as Joey had done, but she could burrow under the loose bedcover, and haul herself up by her arms. Even as an adult, when she could jump up, she still continued to haul herself up out of habit.

She, too, invented games, and played them with whatever the key object was with as much glee and gusto as he had - more so, perhaps, since his natural element was the trees outside, but hers could only be, and was, right there. I kept the lights as low as possible, putting them out when I could. But one 40 watt reading lamp in a room still leaves plenty of dark floor space and corners for a little possum - under my chair, and under the

desk at which I was working, for preference, since she could stay close to me. While she didn't like coming into the full light, did so as little as possible, and preferred the light out, all but the part of the room on which the light was actually focussed was no brighter than full moonlight, and a good deal of it considerably darker.

The room had been scrubbed several times, and fumigated, after Joey's departure, and that, by now, was over six months in the past. But she still picked up his scent, particularly where he had chest-marked. She sniffled eagerly at the places where he had spent most of his time, excited by what her nose told her. And she devoted much of her attention to those places. The window, of course. Even without prior possum activity the window, with safety behind it, but clear vision and smell out of it, would have proved a very wonderful place. After I couple of months I at last had the pleasure of seeing her, by now clearly a very undersized possum, sitting on the window, where so many of her relations had sat before her.

The route up to the wardrobe, especially the door jambs, were of even more interest. Joey had marked them regularly, with very careful attention, as the route to his nest. Snoopy, therefore, concluded that a possum had gone up there frequently, and tried to follow. Of course she had no chance. Her best jump at that stage took her hind feet half an inch off the ground at most. The quarter-inch purchase on the door jambs was simply not enough for her to get a hold. I had been amazed at Joey's ability to climb it - it could only be done at all in one movement, as there was no real handhold or foothold for a break en route. Joey had, in fact, skimmed up it, as he skimmed when he was `flying' outside in the treefern. I later saw another normal youngster go up those jambs, and confirmed what I had initially though: only an exceptionally nimble youngster could have managed it with the facility Joey did.

For Snoopy, of course, it was hopeless. But the more her efforts failed, the more determined she became. A possum had gone up there frequently. Therefore there must be something good up there for possums. She couldn't get up there, so there must be something even better for possums than she'd supposed. It was still denied her. Possum heaven must lie on top of the wardrobe, up the door jambs.

She tried running jumps, with no success. She ran at, and jumped at, first one door jamb then the other. But the action gradually became ritualized. Rear up against one jamb, run to the other, rear up against it. Four steps rear, four steps back, rear. For hours on end, four steps rear, four steps rear. As it became ritualized, it lost its original meaning, just as Joey's expeditions away from me, and hasty retreats, became ritualized into a game of chasings, played for its own sake, for enjoyment. Before long it became evident that Snoopy's scuttle was her favourite game.

It looked so much as if she wanted to go through the door that even though I had watched the scuttle develop I still sometimes got up and opened it for her. All I got was a hurt look from Snoopy, who walked away, ears drooping, muscles no longer taught with excitement. I'd spoilt the game. The flat, impenetrable vertical surface, marked by clear boundaries, was necessary to it. And possum heaven had, in any case, never lain on the other side of the door. It was up the jambs, on top of the wardrobe, and there was no way, including putting her up there to see for herself, that I could disillusion her.

I soon stopped trying. Her game obviously gave her pleasure. She retained her scuttle as long as I knew her, at first as an infant game, later as an adolescent escape, like Joey's kneading, later still as an adult mannerism. It always brought her pleasure and reassurance. The flat

impenetrable vertical surface, preferably in relationship to her food and nest as shown on the plan, bed parallel to the scuttling place, with food dish between, was a basic necessity. She only did it in a place of security, but as her confidence increased, she found more places, always inside the house, where she felt secure. As she performed it under slightly different circumstances, it became liberated from its rigid form, longer, with or without rearing - she developed other variations suitable for performance in the different places in which she performed them. But the basic four steps rear, four steps rear, always remained, included within the variations at some point or another.

Snoopy's scuttle became a reliable barometer of her mood. A busy, steady little scuttle meant a contented, comfortable possum, a joyous bouncing scuttle meant a possum in fine form; a rather frantic desperate scuttle meant that there was something big and hairy and trichosurine peering in the window behind her, and she didn't want to know about it. She retired into her fantasy world.

It became clear very early that she was fantasizing when she did it. As a youngster she was obviously acting out stories in her mind: you could follow the plot, roughly, by her tempo and attitudes, her actions rising to a crescendo as the story reached some high point. In later years, if I interrupted her, her reaction was one of embarrassment, precisely that, and expressed in facial expressions and body attitudes exactly the same, allowing for the difference in anatomy, as a human under similar circumstances: a teenager caught dancing alone to music, or bouncing on a bed, or running for no reason, giving physical expression to a private fantasy adventure in which he or she is totally engrossed, at a stage of development when society dictates that this is no longer permissible and fantasy must be indulged in only at second hand, via a book or television.

I couldn't participate in this game physically, but I could get into the act vocally. She had shown by her behaviour outside that, like most sensible children, she distinguished clearly between the dream world and reality, so I didn't begrudge her her daydreams that brought her so much pleasure. I couldn't follow the details of the plot, but it was very evident that she was acting out adventure stories in her own mind. And she herself was the heroine, the biggest, hairiest, strongest most invincible female possum in the world, a trichosurine James Bond. So when her tempo increased to a crescendo, I urged her on, as I did in her war-games, yelling, `Go, Snoopy, go!' And she took heart from my exhortations, redoubled hr efforts, and scuttled on to victory.

Joey, at the height of his fantasies, became airborne. Snoopy could not, but she did use her front feet less and less as the tempo increased, until finally they played no part at all. She scuttled on her hind feet alone, for three or four-step passes. Other possums, once they have picked up speed, sometimes fail to touch the ground with their front paws when bounding, but I've never seen another one take more than two or three steps of the diagonal gait, without coming down on all fours.

Loud rock music with a heavy beat also stimulated her scuttle: as the music rose to a crescendo, so did she. But on only one occasion did she actually keep in time with the music. It was an instrumental number on the radio, not heavy rock, and one I hadn't heard before. This time she actually danced. She rose on her back legs alone, and moved backwards and forwards in time with the music, increasing her tempo as it did. The number was back-announced as, `For Animals Only'.

I nearly called the station to ask for a repeat.

I didn't dare. It would only have spoilt the story. It is a true story, but a coincidence, a fluke.[xx]

Snoopy's scuttle was not only a mannerism which remained with her as long as I knew her, an activity which gave her pleasure and reassurance. It was also the best exercise anyone could have dreamed up for strengthening her back legs. I had, of course, tried all the usual things, putting my finger or a pencil in her back hands to encourage her to grip, massaging her legs and working them with my hands, all to no avail. As so often happens with possums, it was the game she invented for herself, for entirely different reasons, from which she derived the maximum benefit.

Her climbing and condition improved, and her periods outside lengthened. Eventually, when she was five months old - some juveniles declare independence as early as three months, occasionally even earlier, while still remaining in the vicinity until the next mating season - she was able to remain alone in Joey's old trees near the house, for periods of up to an hour and a half. She knew her own limitations, however, and almost always came immediately when I called her down - although there were exceptions.

While it was evident to me that she was below par for a possum her age, from her purely subjective point of view the worst was over after the first four weeks. What she could do, she did with ease - although compared to the other youngsters her outside and climbing activities were terribly limited. But she made up for it in her own room, where, as I knew from Joey, there were facilities to delight even a healthy little possum, with the whole outside at his command. She had her window, and her window ledge, her desk and her chair to play under. And best of all she had her bed.

I guess most human children, particularly under about eight, play games in bed at night before they go to sleep. I know I did. Try to imagine what fun you could have had like that if you were the size and shape of a six inch possum.

The bed was also her sleeping place, her nest. For the sake of conciseness and politeness, I tell people that she slept on my bed for 4½ years. In fact her most frequent position was on the foot of the bed, above the bedclothes, as long as I knew her. But she was a possum, and couldn't be exposed in the day. So, as I had done with Joey, I left an old chenille bedspread loose on top, and she would pull herself up underneath it. From the outside it looked exactly like the activity of a cartoon-strip gopher, burrowing at high speed.

I couldn't help laughing at that, if I were far enough away for her not to know - I laughed at that the last day I saw her. But not within her hearing. Like every other animal I've ever met she was delighted if you laughed <u>with</u> her, sharing her pleasure in something, but hated to be laughed <u>at.</u>

Like the famous otters, however, it is more true to say that she slept throughout the bed than on it. She burrowed under any layer of bedclothes that took her fancy, skilfully and adeptly, and without waking me. Find Snoopy was always the first thing to be done each morning. From experience, she found that the layers under me entailed the risk of a slightly squashed possum, and so avoided them, but, particularly when she was a youngster, anywhere else was fair game.

At roughly the same age that Joey decided to sleep away from his mother, and moved under the bed, and thence to the top of the wardrobe, Snoopy did likewise. But a couple of nights under the bed convinced her that it was a good alternative nest, but not up to the main one. I have no doubt that, had she been physically capable of doing so, she would have followed the same pattern as Joey, and moved to the top of the wardrobe. Her daughter Kylie did so, sleeping first with Snoopy, in or under the bed,

wherever she happened to be, then on top of a wardrobe, the highest suitable position in the room, then in the roof immediately over the bed, progressively moving to other parts of the roof, then trees in her own territory, returning to the roof at intervals, particularly when she had a baby.

For Snoopy, however, there were only two alternatives, under the bed or on/in it. She made the same choice any other possum would have made, given the circumstances, and opted for the better nest as her main nest.

We did, at that time, offer her Joey's old box in the trees outside. By this time I knew Snoopy's expressions, attitudes and gestures well enough to attempt to translate them into words. And her opinion of that proposal is not repeatable.

In retrospect, I realise that it wasn't on, anyway. Once a possum started sleeping in that box regularly, its advantages would have become apparent to all the others, and it would simply have been taken over by the strongest female who had an inferior nest.

Except for a phase when she actually reached maturity, which I'll describe later, Snoopy apparently decided to forgive me for being in her nest, and see what the situation held for her.

Like other possums she developed a sleep ritual fairly early in the piece, consisting basically of establishing the place where she intended to sleep that day, then grooming herself thoroughly before going blissfully to sleep. In time, however, I became necessary to that ritual. She waited until I was nearly asleep, beyond protest - anything to be left in peace! - then sniffled in my ear, nosing the bedclothes beside me, `May I please come in?' I was supposed to say, `Hi, Tiger', very sleepily, and then eventually, move the bedclothes a little, so she could get into the position of her choice. If I fell asleep first, it didn't really matter, she got in anyway, without waking me. But, especially after she became an adult, and so extremely particular about who was allowed in her nest, the little recognition ceremony and the `Hi, Tiger' were a must.

Once installed in the layer of her choice, she set about making herself as comfortable as possible. Like Joey before her, she wanted to be cuddled. Whether in the same layer as me or not, she tried to find a curve in my body where she could nestle against me - the small of my back, or behind my knees if I were lying on my side, was ideal - so that she was in part surrounded by me. And she became quite adept at Joey's trick of somehow getting herself between my side and my arm, if I were lying on my back, stretching out on her back, and pillowing her head on my shoulder, all without disturbing me.

As a baby, she would simply wriggle herself into the position she chose. As an adult, she would usually ask politely if I was arranged the wrong way, but if necessary bump me into the position she required with her rump. She had no inhibitions about re-arranging the furniture to suit her own convenience. Once settled in, she proceeded to groom herself, and then, as a youngster, gradually fell asleep. As an adult, she would sometimes get out again, and pursue her own business, scuttling, meditating, feeding, for another half hour or so before she returned to the same position or another.

But the ceremony, the sleep ritual, became more frequent, and more imperative, as she got older. Finally, if she wanted to go to sleep before I did, she would come and get me. Her gestures for asking for something, sitting up, patting my leg or plucking at my slacks with her hand to get my attention, then looking pleadingly up, were by that stage well established. The trick was that I had to guess what it was that she was

asking for. At first I couldn't work it out, but then, through trial and error, I did. She wanted me to put my wretched thesis away and come to bed, so that she could perform her sleep ritual, and go to bed herself - whether with me, on the bed, under the bed or in one of the other alternative nests she established.

When she was still a youngster, I didn't in fact make too much difficulty about letting her sleep where she chose. Joey had taught me that it was pretty pointless anyway, as a nocturnal animal has the advantage over you - it generally goes to sleep after you do, and puts itself where it pleases. I did envisage at that stage that she would eventually grow up and choose to sleep elsewhere, though by now I had begun to realise, from the behaviour of the other possums round about, that females don't leave home unless they have to, and hoped Snoopy would be able to stay with me on that basis. By the time it was apparent that that wasn't going to happen, her ways had become too set.

In the meantime, I wasn't too unhappy about the situation. I knew that she was clean, that she ate the same food I did, and that she carried no diseases or parasites - paradoxically, although physically disabled and weak, she was always an extremely healthy possum in that way, and in 4½ years I can remember only two slight `colds', or what at any rate had the same symptoms. And, in the depths of winter, a mink-covered hot water bag that radiates heat for an inch around it is not something to dislike. I would be a liar if I said I didn't come to like having her somewhere close by, particularly after a near-disaster when she was about two, and to have Snoopy safe and warm and happy and comfortable under the bedcover, against my legs, came to mean to me pretty much what it obviously did to her. Everything was well with the world.

As an adult, when she had established her various alternative sleeping places, she became a fairly accurate thermometer. When the temperature was reasonable, I would find her on top of the bedclothes, under the bedcover. As it became colder, she would progress downwards, layer by layer, and when it hit freezing point outside I would be sure to find a possum in beside me, thoroughly appreciative of the advantages of an electric blanket. As the weather grew warmer, she would progress upwards out the various layers until she was back under the bedcover again. When the temperature approached the century mark she would adjourn to under the bed, where the mattress above acted as insulation, and where it was about ten degrees Fahrenheit cooler, or beside the bed, under the trailing bedclothes, where the lino was cool, for that counted as the bed, too.

Like all sensitive instruments, she was, however, subject to disruption by outside conditions. A crisis, or just an attack of affection, would send her back in with me, while an anti-social mood, or the need to assert her adulthood, would send her under the bed, or to one of the alternative nests, whatever the
weather.

Much of this still lay in the future. As a growing youngster, she simply loved curling up against her mother, as all little possums do. With her bed, and her scuttling place, and her window, and her room, and easy trees outside to play in whenever the weather wasn't too bad, her own movements becoming easier, her ability to do new things gradually increasing, she was a very happy young lady. She couldn't, as I could, see the problems ahead.

I can remember only two crises after those first six weeks. One occurred when she was out by herself, playing, meditating a little, and browsing. I went out to collect her after about an hour, and found her weakly clinging to a high branch. Her movements were feeble, and unco-

ordinated, as if she were drunk. She looked to be right back where she started from. This particular tree was well known to her by now, and she had found her own way of coping with its various convolutions, the easiest routes and hand- and toe-holds charted, so that she could, by what for any other possum would be a circuitous route, go up, and perambulate through it. She could even get herself down, as far as the lowest fork, which I could reach with my hand, so that she could walk down my arm. But this night it was only too apparent that she was in difficulties, and too afraid even to make the attempt. I spent the best part of an hour trying to talk her down, calling, and coaxing, and reassuring her, and going as far as I could up to reach her. Finally she made the effort, just letting herself go and sliding down the last little bit.

I carried her inside, semi-conscious, and examined her as best I could. There didn't seem to be any injury, and I couldn't work it out at all. Then a swollen, satiated leach crawled out of her mouth, and there was blood all over the place.

I didn't know what to do. What can you do, some time around half past twelve at night, about a weak, undersized possum suffering from what, for her size, is a very serious loss of blood? She was also, of course, very cold, and by now unconscious. I stopped the remaining bleeding with ice, but, on the principle of *primum non nocere*, then reverted back to the same old tactics - put her to bed, keep her warm, feed her a little warm milk and lie down beside her, to warm her and reassure her if she woke. Anyway, it worked - by morning she was still clearly alive, and then slipped into a more natural sleep.

Whether the leech just crawled into her mouth of its own accord, or whether her insectivorous activities got her into trouble, I don't know. If the latter, it was one of only two times she made a mistake about what to eat.

Like all animals, she liked a treat. Like baby possums in particular, she considered the best treat consisted of sharing my food, so I always kept a little of anything special that I got to offer her, at least - since the food itself was often exactly the same as she was given, often cut from the same piece of fruit, it was the act of offering her mine that counted. On one occasion someone had given us some rainbow trout - I offered a little bit to Snoopy. She was always extremely polite. She would take whatever I offered her, first in her mouth, then in her hands,[r] though on this occasion she accepted the first mouthful but absolutely refused to take any more. Later that night, she had diarrhoea, and so did all the human members of the family.

Her politeness, and her implicitly trust in me, had let her down. After that she was more circumspect. She was still unfailingly polite, still took anything I offered her, and examined it, but was more prone to trust her own judgment as to whether it was edible or not. She would sniff it, taste a little, and come to a decision. If it was not to her liking she would drop it, or occasionally throw it away with her hands. [xxi] If I still remained dense, and persisted in offering her something after she'd rejected it, she would eventually push my hand away with one of hers, gently, but firmly, at the same time wrinkling her nose in an expression of disgust and turning her head away from the offending object. `Oh, phew, no!'

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r. Possums tend to take food first in their hands slightly more often than they take if first in their mouths, but this leads to accidentally scratching fingers, so I'd persuaded her to use the alternative method.

The night after the leech incident, she was still a bit wobbly on her pins, and stayed in bed apart from a brief expedition round the room. But the night after that she was back to normal - her normal, that is. By this time it consisted of a very small, reddish coloured possum, still not entirely covered on the underside, still incapable of climbing with any great facility, falling down several times before finally getting up a tree, but able to move around, and sit and meditate, in certain known trees. Sitting still in her own tree, she now, indeed, did look rather like a possum. The trouble was, the other possums were beginning to think so too. She was growing up, and losing the protection of babyhood.

Naturally, a possum in my room attracted other possums to the window. The presence of a possum regularly residing in a certain place means not only that it's a safe place for possums, but that there's something good for possums there. Even apart from curiosity, of which such an unusual situation excites plenty, it calls for investigation, to see what they can get out of it.

Jenny still dropped in for a bite to eat occasionally. She and Snoopy preserved complete propriety - that is to say they ignored each other, and each went on with her own business, just as would have happened elsewhere with the dominant, Jenny, in the proximity of the nest of her juvenile daughter, a nest she didn't particularly covet for herself. Jenny was never ambitious of living in the house.

The other most persistent visitor was, of course, Mephistopheles. He had no inhibitions whatsoever about coming in the window with the light on, planting himself in the middle of the bed, and demanding dinner.

The first two times he appeared Snoopy went into a panic, and hid until after he'd departed. I didn't discourage him, however. Snoopy, because she became cold and tired so quickly, couldn't spend more than a couple of hours outside, so she didn't get to see too many other possums. I couldn't risk leaving her alone in their proximity, because of her physical inability to either fight or run away. She lacked neither courage, nor the extreme circumspection Joey had had to develop, but her physical disabilities prevented her from putting either into practice. This in turn meant, and continued to mean, that even a minor squabble had serious implications for her. So, as long as it was only a temporary panic on her part, I encouraged him to stay. He ignored her, and concentrated on finding out about what he'd come to find out about, the availability of food and the general set-up.

After the first couple of visits Snoopy proceeded to ignore him, too. She went on with her own business, scuttling, grooming, eating, playing, though she stayed away from his immediate proximity. He, however, after a few nights, found out what he'd come to find out.

As he'd suspected, there was the best possum nest in the world in there - delicious food, complete comfort, freedom to move about in safety, easy access to the outside world and freedom to come and go. It was occupied, moreover, by an incredibly small, weak, possum.

Naturally, under the circumstances, he decided he wanted it for himself. Having just a taste of it, on his nightly visits, wasn't really good enough. Only one possum can own a prize nest, and that possum was going to be him.

He proceeded to chase Snoopy, and bite her. I intervened enough to allow her to escape into a dark corner, and endeavoured to persuade Meph to leave. I yelled at him, and tried to push him out the window, but he took no notice whatsoever. Finally, he decided to mooch off of his own accord. But he was back the next night, for a repeat performance.

Till then I had never used physical force on an adult possum - I'd smacked the babies occasionally, but I'd been worried at first that I might hurt an adult, and later, when I began to see how tough they are, that I might provoke an attack on myself. I had no illusions about the damage a possum can do when it really means it. This situation, however, called for strong measures.

I got a roll of newspaper and rapped him smartly across the snout. He didn't appear to notice. I rapped him harder and harder, and he still politely ignored what he seemed to consider meaningless human vagaries. To a possum, humans are somewhat dense, lumbering, if well-meaning creatures. They commit social blunders in their relations with possums that even the tiniest baby would instinctively avoid. But the possums remain polite - there is no point in upsetting a food-giver, and if they know, from experience, that your intentions are good, they'll accept the thought for the fact unless you go to what, for a possum, is extremes. The trouble is that most people don't know what possum extremes are.

Finally, I was clouting Meph across the snout as hard as I could, and gradually a look of comprehension, then incredulity, came over his face. There was something about the gesture that was familiar, but he couldn't believe that anything so mild was meant in earnest. It was supposed to be done with a handful of razor-sharp claws, and tremendous force.

Meph was a polite possum, so he eventually good-naturedly accepted the gesture for the deed, and left for the night. But he was, of course, back the next night.

In the meantime, I'd come to a decision. Up till then I'd left both the window and the flyscreen open at night, except in very bad weather. The law states that you cannot keep a possum in captivity, and, regardless of the law, you cannot do it in fact; so many of its behaviour patterns require room to move that it ceases to be a possum if compelled to stay, and if placed under compulsion will seize any opportunity presented to escape. Snoopy as adult had to be free to come and go as she wanted - she wouldn't have stayed more than a few weeks on any other basis. Most of the time she, of her own volition, did not go out. But she always checked to see whether the window was open, then, having satisfied herself that she could go if she wanted to, prudently decided to remain in safety and comfort.

However, at this stage Snoopy was still a partially crippled youngster. She, being a sensible youngster, only ventured a couple of feet from the window on her own, once in a blue moon. As long as access remained, Mephistopheles was going to come in and bite her.

When Meph returned the next night, he found the flyscreen shut in his face. From then on it remained shut, unless Snoopy herself went to it and asked for it to be opened.

She could ask for that very well, just as any intelligent dog or cat can ask for the door to be opened to let them out, but I was forever making mistakes. The sight of her gazing out a closed window, in fact meditating happily, seeing and smelling from safety like a possum up a tree, always prompted ideas of captive animals in my mind. Even when she'd shown quite clearly the difference between her looking out the window and asking to be let out, I was still forever opening windows that she wanted shut. All I'd get was a disgruntled, disappointed possum, who promptly walked away, ears down. I'd spoilt the game again.

Snoopy, because of her disabilities, was in fact a far easier baby from my point of view than Joey. She couldn't, and didn't want to, go out very much, certainly not in bad weather. And she slept a lot more, at night as well as during the day.

But, angelic as she appeared when she was asleep, that didn't mean that she was in fact an angel. All little possums are mischievous creatures, and she was no exception. She was also extremely strong-minded, with a very marked will of her own. The daughter of Mephistopheles could be a little imp when she chose.

All possums are contrasuggestive on principle. In the world in which they live their own judgment is their only protection against change, and any attempt to make up their minds for them is likely to produce the opposite result to that desired. Snoopy decided to see what electric light cord tasted like.

I knew that possums are sometimes held responsible for damage to wires, and that while it is often bush-rats who are the actual culprits - any place accessible to a possum is accessible to rats - it is indeed sometimes the possums who do it. I didn't want Snoopy contracting any habits like that, so I did everything I could think of - smacking her, removing the cords out of her reach - all to no avail. As soon as I replaced them she was at it again.

Finally, I just disconnected one of the cords and gave it to her. She satisfied her curiosity, decided it wasn't any good to her after all, and I never had any trouble of that sort again.

Like many possums, Snoopy had a feet fixation. Feet are the most accessible, and to a possum the most interesting smelling parts of the human anatomy. For Snoopy as a playful youngster, bare toes had to be pursued, and nibbled and nipped if captured. I knew this and avoided the situation - bare toes in bed were permitted to remain unmolested.

A friend of ours visited us while I was trying unsuccessfully to find somewhere for Snoopy and me to live. She saw Snoopy first, as most people did, while she was blissfully asleep in the daytime. Naturally, she fell for her. A possum asleep puts out all the signals of a human baby. Snoopy was so obviously a baby in a woolly jumpsuit, with little black gloves and socks, that few people could help reacting to her in that way. If the head was different, well, it was just the teddy bear you had as a child. When it wakes and uses its hand in a manner so precisely like human hands, with accompanying facial expressions that are so obviously equivalent to human ones, then your first suspicions are simply confirmed. Snoopy asleep, or half-asleep, was angelic and irresistible. `What landlord could possibly object to her?' said our friend.

I was forced to admit, somewhat to her incredulity, that Snoopy at that stage wasn't always such an angel when she was awake.

That evening, Snoopy, in a great state of glee, pursued our friend, dressed for the summer in shorts and sandals, all around the loungeroom. She ended up cross-legged on a chair, while I removed the miniature menace.

It had indeed become apparent by this time that Snoopy and I were going to have to find somewhere else to be. She was approaching puberty, and losing the protection of babyhood. Like Joey before her, she spent more and more time inside, in my room, and Meph had made it quite clear that even that was not to be conceded to her. While I had some idea at that stage that females don't leave home unless they have to, and if they do, stay where they finish up after the first move, it was equally apparent that Snoopy wasn't going to be one of the survivors of the forthcoming mating season.

She could climb, quite literally, like a cat. That is to say, she could climb like a terrestrial animal which can go up a tree if necessary, but is not in its natural element once up there, not like a possum, an essentially arboreal animal which can, if necessary, spend some

of its time on the ground. She could go up certain familiar trees, but if faced with a strange one had to take several ineffective jumps at the base. While she had all the right instincts, she could neither fight, nor run away, well enough to keep herself out of trouble. She was going to be driven away as soon as my back was turned, and her inability to climb unknown trees effectively made her an easy prey for the first dog or cat that came along.

She had, in fact, only just started to manage to come back in the window herself when the possum situation outside began to make it impossible for her to go out alone. To a certain extent I could help by taking her out, but she had, at the same time, reached the stage where she could get to the top of her own trees, and so beyond my effective protection.

While she herself seemed perfectly happy to remain in my room, the sanitary problem was beginning to be too great. A half-grown possum, even one only half the size it should be at that age, permanently confined to one room, doesn't make life particularly pleasant for the other people in the house. I was going to have to find somewhere for us to live where I was the only one to suffer, and where the problem could in any case be mitigated by giving her a larger area inside, and where she could spend more of her time outside when she wanted to.

A move suited me, too. I was writing a thesis, and finding the activities of the other members of the family, and the necessity for keeping their hours, too difficult. It was time we both left home.

Oddly enough, that's easier said than done. I was on a scholarship, so money wasn't all that plentiful. I needed a place where I could be alone, with access to at least some trees outside. I've always been semi-nocturnal, working best at night, and Joey and Snoopy had helped me to develop my natural habits. So I needed somewhere with four walls and a roof and electricity. I also at first stipulated water, though later I had to compromise on that. It had to be somewhere I could afford, but also, for preference, somewhere not too good, where any minor depredations Snoopy might commit wouldn't cause us to be thrown out on the street. While I was looking, however, and saw what was on offer in the built-up areas, I came to feel no regret for the added requirements imposed by Snoopy. The places I saw which weren't fit for Snoopy weren't fit for me either.

In the meantime, knowing that the first thing any possum that's moved does is to try to go home, I tried to devise some form of identification for Snoopy to carry temporarily. There just didn't seem to be any part of her anatomy where I could attach something without constricting her movements, and, heaven knows, her movements were already constricted enough by her own physical disabilities.

The only hopeful place seemed to be her ears, but, at that stage, they were her one beauty, dark skin on the back, with a very white ruff at the base of the back, bordered by a line of chocolate coloured fur, and long enough so that when she decided to curl up in a ball, tail over her nose, and retire from the world, she could put them down over her eyes to completely seal the system. I used to feel sorry for her little daughter Kylie, who inherited shorter ears from her father and couldn't manage the same trick.

In any case it isn't a very safe place for an identification mark. I've seen quite a few possums with V-nicks out of their ears, and at first assumed that someone had marked them, until I saw the nicks in the making. Possum ears, like those of dogs and cats, are subject to battering in a fight, particularly those of a male, the courting process being what it is. When a cut on the edge of the ear coincides with a natural fold in the

skin, the result is a permanent V-nick, identical to the sort you used to see deliberately used on dogs before the days of compulsory registration.

I tried an identity bracelet, for experimental purposes made of cardboard with a red reflecting surface. I had made it loose, so as not to constrict the muscular expansion of her forearms, for her front legs were still her main means of getting up trees. I also had to make it easily breakable at first, rather than letting her get entangled in the branches - anything round her neck was, of course, unthinkable for that reason.

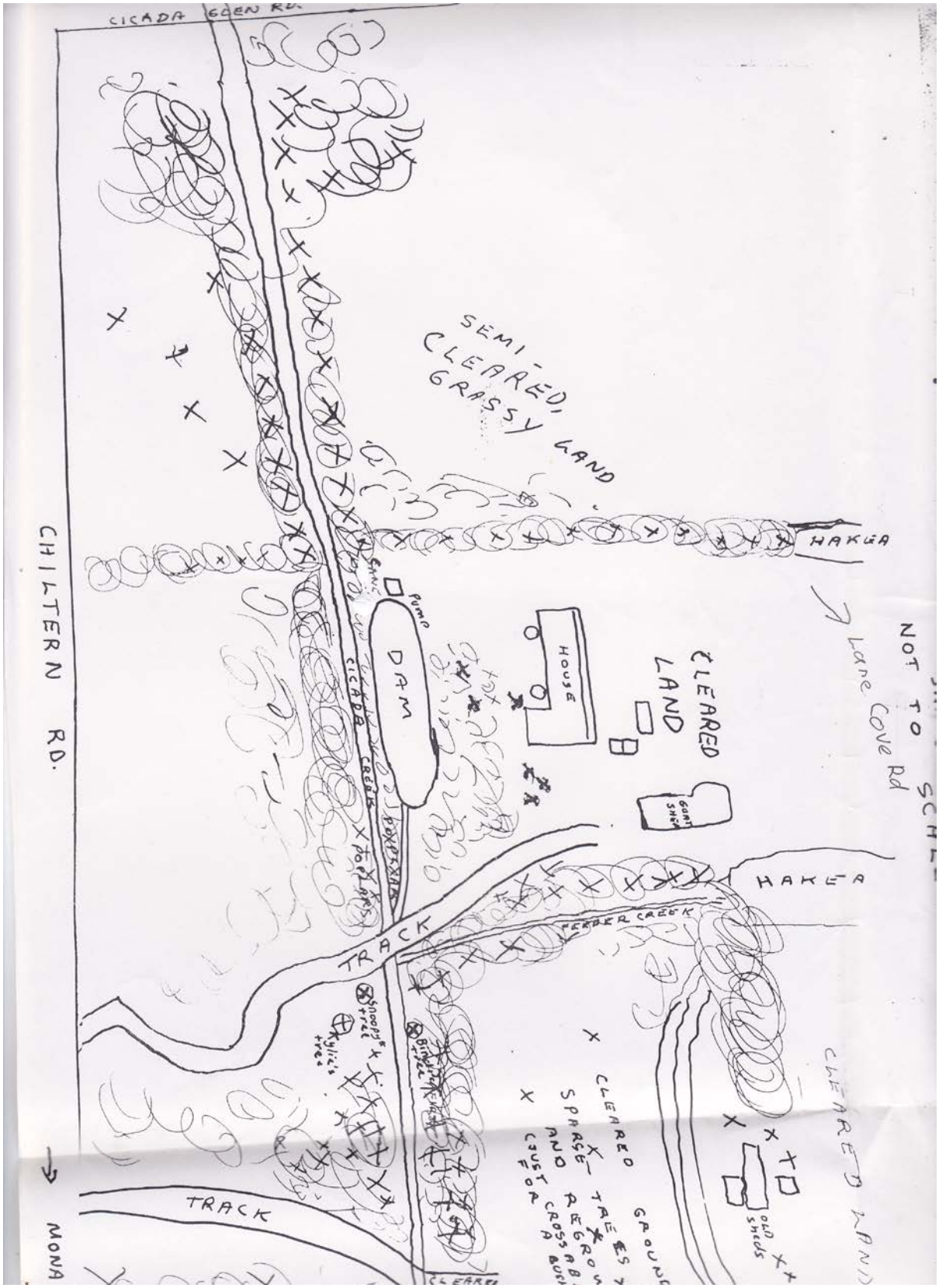
I've since had a very vain little cat, who was delighted to accept a collar as a present. Snoopy accepted her bracelet as a present, too, but one of the order of garish socks given to you by someone you don't want to hurt.

She would sit politely while I slipped it over her hand, on to her wrist, keep it on for a while, then quietly remove it, closing her hand and slipping it over it as a human would a bangle. Possums have whiskers, like cats' whiskers, on their front wrists as well as on their snouts, to help them mover through narrow places in the dark. No doubt it tickled, and interfered with their function.

For several evenings we continued in the same manner: I would slip it on, she would slip it off. The longest she ever kept it on was about an hour - it came off as she went up a tree.

Finally she got sick of the performance, and ceased to be polite. She started running away as soon as she saw me approaching with the bracelet. If I caught her, she would struggle to get away, and when I pinned the hand I wanted, would try to push my hand away with her other one. And when I finally got it on, she promptly took it off, in a very disgruntled manner. So in the end I had to give up the idea.

I was very nearly in despair about finding us a place to be, too. Anything remotely suitable seemed to be out of my price range. Then finally, through the good offices of a friend, I heard about an old farmhouse at the back of an eight acre block in Chiltern Road, Ingleside, and, thanks to the kindness of a tolerant landlord, Snoopy and I set up house.


CICADA GLEN RD.
SEMI-CLEARED, GRASSY LAND
HAKEA
NOT TO SCALE
Lane Cove Rd
HOUSE
CLEARED LAND
GUN SHED
DAM
PUMP
CICADA CREEK
TRACK
HAKEA
CLEARED GROUND
OLD SHEDS
CHILTERN RD.
TRACK
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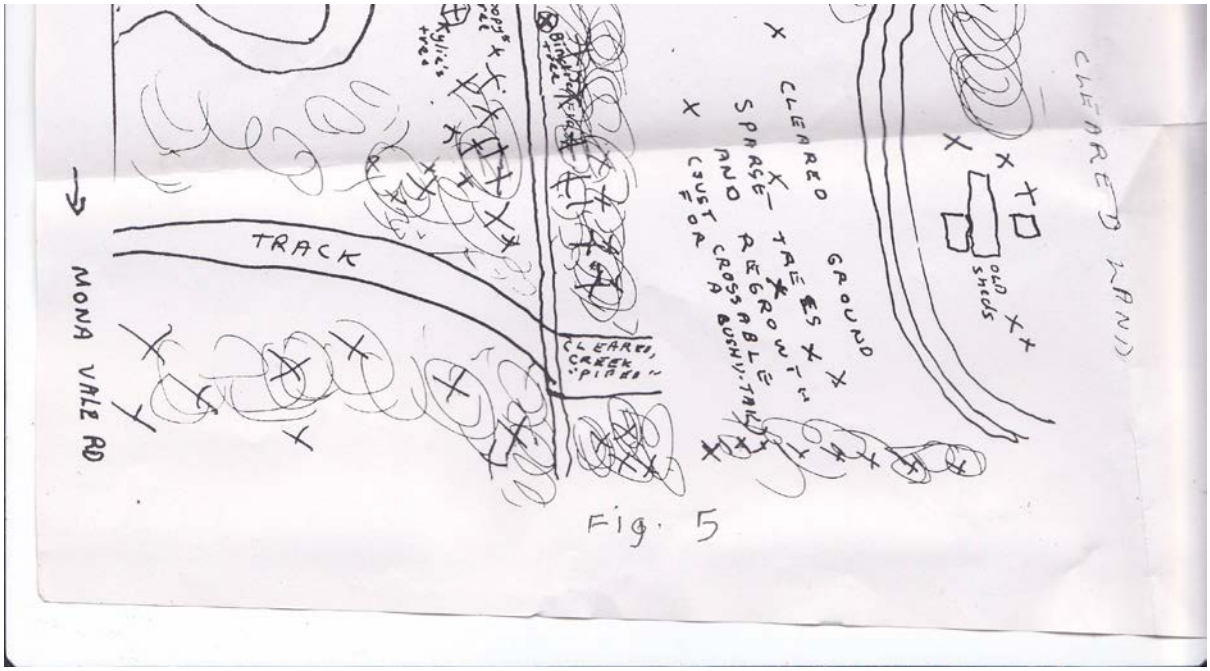

Fig. 5

2. The Inglesiders

BEGINNINGS The little farmhouse at Ingleside might have been designed for one human and one possum. It was old, and not exactly a palace, having been abandoned as a permanent human residence a few months before, as the family outgrew it. But for one human and one possum it could be, and was, made very comfortable.

A couple of the floorboards creaked: with the whole house to play with you just avoided those two places, and put something over them. The electricity supply was somewhat idiosyncratic - one line, and one power point in some rooms, those which later became bedroom and study, as well one each in the kitchen and laundry. Well, one human only occupies one room at a time, and possums prefer the dark in any case. And long leads are no trouble with a possum who has discovered for herself that they aren't worth investigating. And so forth.

From my point of view there were some minor disadvantages, but nothing that couldn't be overcome. There was no water in this part of Ingleside, but there were two tanks, one of which, giving adequate supply for one person (provided you don't indulge in water gobbling devices like washing machines) always seemed to work even when the other was temporarily out of commission. There is, or at least was, no effective public transport in that part of Ingleside - three private buses passing along Chiltern Rd., or Mona Vale Rd., each week day, none at weekends. I'd never been able to afford to run a car, but I already had a 50 cc. motor scooter to get to university and back.

The house itself was built along the lines of wattle-and-daub construction, by the people who'd owned it before the present owners. There was a wooden framework with pierced corrugated iron in place of wattle, cement rendering over the top in place of daub, and a corrugated iron roof. The design was basically a series of rooms, connected to each other by doors on either side, with a veranda, covered at one end - a good place to keep a bike - running along the front. At one end the kitchen and laundry

at right angles to the main line formed the beginning of the short stroke of an L. The main line of rooms, large bedroom, small entrance `hall', study, lounge room, gave Snoopy an area of about 35 feet by 30 that was all hers.

As always with possums, it wasn't the actual area as much as the facilities in it that counted. By this time she obviously owned some furniture, an old Victorian stuffed screen which gave her access to the window (which was well within the scope of other possums but impossible for her), the furniture from my bedroom, the desk, the chair, the standard lamp and above all the bed, all of which came with her.

My parents were in the throes of remodelling at Newport, so I inherited discarded furniture from there, again smelling familiar to Snoopy. The house possessed two small single wardrobes, an old stove, an old washing machine, a kitchen dresser and assorted chairs when I came, and there was enough from Newport to make up the rest. Starting with bare rooms was a great advantage to us both, since it meant that we could arrange things according to her own requirements.

The construction of the house, being of the owner-builder type, was not exactly orthodox - the walls, for example, were vertical even when the floor wasn't horizontal - it followed the ground beneath in places, so that the wall surrounding the front door was on a slightly acute angle to the floor inside, a sure cure for alcoholics. But it was a sturdy little house, built and designed for the conditions that existed there, and it weathered all the storms, including Sydney's mini-cyclone of the early seventies, with nothing more than a couple of loose pieces of corrugated iron on the roof.

Against the kitchen-laundry, another room had been constructed at a later date, with the assistance of other people, and by more conventional methods. Naturally, it soon became unfit for human inhabitation - the wood and fibro gave up the ghost very early in the piece, except for the main framework, while the `updated wattle-and-daub' of the main house held firm. It was partially unroofed each time there was anything approaching a wind. Unfortunately - or fortunately, depending on your point of view - the room was constructed prior to the installation of electricity, and the fuse box was on its outer wall, so it had to remain standing for the time being. In the meantime it had been serving as a handy place to store junk, like an old-fashioned attic, and I put it to the same use.

Under the previous owners it had been the domain of a couple of dogs. Later, that end of it which did remain waterproof, by then fortuitously equipped with a cast-off bed and doubled-over double bed mattress, became the domain of a couple of cats. A handy place to store things, a very nice place for cats, an interesting place for possums to explore on occasion, but not suitable for humans to live in. (See Fig.)

In addition to the main part of the house, with occasional expeditions into the kitchen and laundry, Snoopy had the veranda in front, with an even better possum veranda, formed by the stand of the tank near the study window, on the other side. And, after the first couple of weeks, all outside.

By sheer fluke I couldn't have found a better place. The block we were on, and the adjacent one to the south, towards Mona Vale Road, each approximately 8 acres, had once been thickly covered with vegetation along the creek, Cicada Glen Creek, which runs parallel to the main axis of the house, a little below it in a slight depression. The trees gradually became thinner, giving way to hakea scrub with occasional saplings, up the slope away from Chiltern Road, towards Lane Cove Road, where there was a band of smaller trees and shrubs, banksias and young gums. Along the creek there

were large gums, about six edible varieties in all, interspersed among the semi-tropical creek vegetation, all in the same area, not, as further downstream in Ku-ring-gai Chase, forming a separate zone up the slopes of the steeper hills and cliffs. Smaller saplings, secondary growth, were interspersed with the larger survivors.

It was an ideal place for possums, plenty of large trees with holes in them for accommodation, a great variety of food available without much travelling, so territories could be smaller, one or two acres. There had been possums there previously, but both blocks had then been cleared. When we arrived the new growth had reached the point where it was once again suitable for possums, and a tree route, with only short gaps, could be established from the creek to the house (though Snoopy herself never followed it). But the previous possums had departed, and those who lived round about had got out of the habit of coming this way, so no one actually owned the house and adjacent territory. (See Fig. 1b)

I didn't know this when I first came. All I saw was a house, with a couple of small Xmas bushes against it, two gum saplings not far beyond, and bush beyond that. It was a place I could afford, it had plenty of room for Snoopy inside, trees close by outside, and, if she could be persuaded to give it a try, a place she was going to love.

There were also disadvantages I didn't see. The locals who regularly travel Mona Vale Road between Ingleside and Mona Vale knew that there is at least one possum killed on the unlit strip every two weeks, more in the mating season. That part of the road consists of blind corners and hills, with an 80 km. speed limit, often read, apparently, in m.p.h. The roadside is inevitably littered with garbage, dumped by the carload or thrown as individual apple cores and so forth from passing vehicles. On the higher side of the road is bush, with no visible houses. The lower side is also lined with bush, but with house-lights down towards the coast, some close, some in fact miles away but looking close because of their strength and the valley between. Home-going suburbanite possums head for the house-lights, the road invisible from above because of the trees lining it and the lack of lights. They either pause for a snack along the side of the road, thoughtfully provided by the humans they have always trusted, or try to cross over. If a car comes over the hill at 80 km. or better, the possum is dazzled by the headlights, confused even more if the horn is sounded. It has no real warning, because both the noise of engine and the lights are cut off by the corners and hills.

There is also an interesting human behaviour pattern connected with that particular strip of road. It is mandatory to pass the car in front, regardless of the speed at which it is travelling, the proximity of a corner or crest, the presence of double lines, and, as I've seen on more than one occasion, regardless of whether there is a vehicle already in sight, approaching head-on from the opposite direction. When this happens, the other cars are forced on to the side of the road. No pedestrian, of any species, stands a chance, and the drivers of the innocent cars have problems, too. It isn't always the car which hits a road victim which is at fault.

There are far more possums killed there than can be accounted for by the local possum population. It just happens to be near one of the places where kindly souls - illegally, of course, but that makes no odds - Return suburbanite possums to Nature.

Some are simply put near trees by the roadside in daylight. Naturally they go up them for safety. Therefore they are obviously all right, free and happy - until night falls and the terrified animals head for home. Others are disposed of with more thought, in the vicinity of the

Katandra Wildlife Sanctuary. The heaviest toll of all comes from there. The incoming possums can't expect a friendly welcome from the previous arrivals, and they know it. The way home is well-indicated, by house-lights on the coast, the smell and sound of the sea, and the road itself. The way lies through a blind cutting through the rock, complete with blind corners, just above Mona Vale Cemetery. There is only a few feet to spare between the marked lanes and the sheer rock face, which gives no way up for a possum in a hurry. Naturally these few feet are always covered with possum food thoughtfully provided by passing motorists, and naturally the same cult is practised: the vehicle in front must be passed, if possible, and forced off the road on to the narrow strip against the rock. At this time the cutting was dimly lit. There are better lights now, and that will help. But it's not going to help very much while the food is still provided, and while possums who don't want to be there are provided to eat it.

When I first took Snoopy to Ingleside I didn't know how bad the situation was, though I knew enough to beware of main roads. But there was a quarter of a mile, mostly bush along the creek, between the house and Mona Vale Road, and by the time I did start to get the picture it was evident that Snoopy had no intention of voluntarily straying so far. I knew that she would live where she chose. I thought she might remain in the house, but if she didn't, then she would go up into the roof, or take up residence in an adjacent tree, and come back for handouts, in the tradition of her ancestors. If she, or any children she might produce, did choose to `go wild', then Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park was just down the road, in the other direction.

Again, all is not what it seems. That part of the Chase is a favourite dumping ground, not only for possums, but also for unwanted cats and dogs. If they can't find a home with local residents, already over-burdened with previous strays, they either starve or prey on whatever wildlife they can find, alive or dead. Of course, the place is also an attraction for Mighty Hunters who find it convenient to demonstrate their prowess by shooting sitting targets which don't know that humans are dangerous. Everyone around does what they can, but that doesn't eliminate shots from there in the night, occasionally. But by the time I found that out, too, Snoopy had given ample proof that she had no intention of living anywhere so silly, and there is plenty of privately owned land downstream, before you get to the Chase.

Settling in and Establishing a Territory

All that lay in the future. For the present, it was a matter of moving in and arranging matters to our mutual satisfaction.

Snoopy was moved while she was asleep in the daytime, in an airways bag that was later to become her regular travelling bag. In the confusion of moving she was parked, bag and all, temporarily on the kitchen dresser. By this time she was used to moving in her sleep on the bed, occasionally falling off, two feet above the ground, if she were too close to the edge. She moved now, and bag and all tumbled off the top of the dresser.

She must have thought she was falling forever. Not an auspicious beginning.

There were other things not entirely to her liking, too. The first night I took her to bed with me, to get her over her fright, but I decided that after that she was going to sleep in a more appropriate place. There was a disused wood-cupboard in the study, near the fireplace, that looked just right.

I had already decided that the study window was a good place for her to go in and out, and a lot of the furniture familiar to her, the desk, the chair, the screen, was located in that room. It seemed a nice idea for

Snoopy to have a room of her own. I fixed the window up so that she could manage it, leaning a board against the sill from the ground outside, with the torn velvet screen leaning beside it inside, a small cupboard with a set of index card drawers immediately in front of it inside, to make an inward extension of the window sill, in lieu of the window ledge at Newport.

On the second day I moved Snoopy into the wood-cupboard while she was asleep, having first set it up for her with cloths to sleep on, her food dish beside it, a little food actually inside, and the door fixed so that it was about three inches ajar - plenty of room for her to go in and out but not enough to let much light in, since it was in any case a dark corner.

Couldn't be better.

The only problem was that Snoopy had other ideas. There was no way in which I could persuade her it was the best place in the world for a possum to sleep. She knew a better place still.

At first I had a polite, but firm possum on my hands, who was obviously distressed by the suggestion, once she gathered what I intended. Then I had a rebellious possum on my hands - she never attacked me, of course, but took off for some inaccessible place, like under the bed, when I tried to catch her, clinging to the woodwork if I tried to haul her out. Then I tried shutting her in the cupboard, and ended up with a terrified, pitifully distressed possum.

I decided to concede the point, until she settled in in other ways.

At night I took her out on my shoulder, and introduced her to the trees immediately beside the house, some large Xmas bushes and the two sizeable gum saplings just across the track.

At first she didn't like the look of it at all. She liked trees, of course, but where were the houses? She was a true suburbanite. So many trees with so few houses in sight scared her.

But she'd always loved going out for rides on my shoulder to explore new places and things, even more than Joey, since she was unable to explore on her own. She would sniff eagerly at new trees, finding out who, particularly in the possum line, habitually used them, seeing there was a way up for her, all the time turning back to me, nif-nif-niffing in my ear, `Ooh, isn't it exciting, isn't it interesting!' Whether she ever tried to communicate anything more specific than just her feelings, I don't know, but she made it quite clear that she wanted my participation in some way. Someone to share her pleasure.

We could, in fact, already have pretty good conversations, each party interpreting the other's sounds and gestures and actions, each, perhaps, learning more by this method than the other intended to communicate. I would take her to a tree, and show it to her, moving my shoulder so that her nose came towards the tree I wanted her opinion of, and she would give it: `Oh yes, very good,' and up she'd go; or `No, nothing particularly interesting, and I can't really see a way up.'

So, by taking her out for half an hour to an hour each night, I gradually got her used to the closest trees. The Xmas bushes were the easiest, because I could put her in the lowest fork, by moving my shoulder level with it and letting her step off, or putting my arm up and letting her step off. The two gum saplings were harder. They intertwined their upper branches, but there were several feet of bare trunk before the first fork. One was a paper-bark, and had to be gone up in one motion or not at all, since any pause meant that the bark came off, and the possum with it; it was years before Snoopy managed that. The other was easier for her, a smooth-bark, and even at the beginning she could manage it, after a couple of

tries, if I started her off about four feet from the ground.

At first, however, she had no intention of going up anywhere, but I stayed with her, and my presence, and the proximity of the house, gave her confidence enough to start her explorations.

Showing her the way home was a bit more difficult than at Newport, as there was no access for humans through the study window. I'd take her back to the window, stopping at every tree to try to get her to develop a pattern of darting quickly from one safe place to the next, then put her on the plank leading up to the window. Nothing would happen, so I tried running round the house and in the front door, and calling her from above, but the first few times she simply took off after me. Eventually I managed to get round to the window inside while she was still making up her mind whether to follow me or not, and persuaded her to come up the plank and in the window of her own accord.

After a week, she had a pretty good idea of the immediately adjacent trees, and was starting to go back up the plank to the window without prompting, so I decided to leave the window open while I was asleep, to let her explore a little for herself.

When I fell asleep she was playing on the bed. The next morning she was gone.

I looked all through the house, and in the trees I knew she knew. There was no sign of her.

There were noises in the roof, which I later discovered were rats, but I was terrified of the electric wires. I thought Snoopy was cured of that, but I turned the power off at the fuse box, anyway, and left the place in darkness, shutting off the old fridge so that I could hear better. I searched all the adjacent bush, as well as I could without knowing it properly, but I had no real idea of where to even start.

By the third night I'd just about given up. I put the power back on, put on the study light, and sat down to dinner by the window; hope never dies entirely. Eventually I fell asleep - I was very tired by then - and woke up to hear possum footsteps. Snoopy marched in the front door, ignored me completely, and headed for under the bed. She didn't seem particularly hungry, though she rather sulkily accepted a little to eat. But then she started to scuttle.

It was only then that the significance of her scuttle dawned on me. It meant that Snoopy was home.

She elected to scuttle between the bed and the wardrobe, her food dish in between, with the wardrobe as the plane upright surface, carefully marked at each end by regular chest-rubbing, just as she renewed Joey's chest-marking on the door jambs. The relationship of the bed (nest), food dish and scuttling place was therefore exactly the same as at Newport.

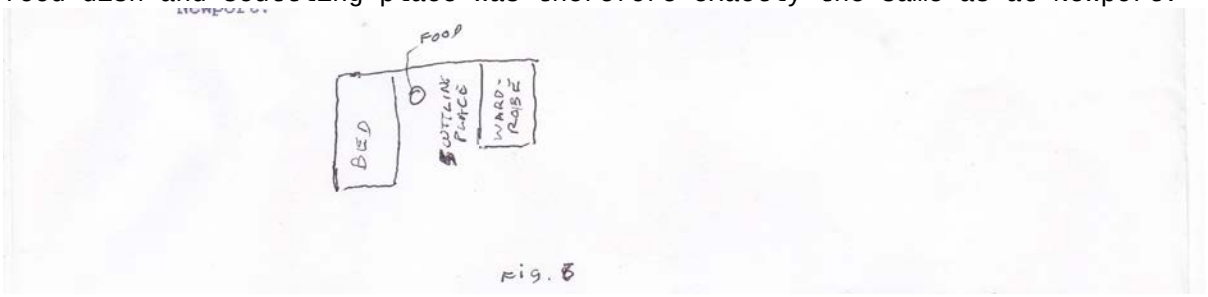

Fig. 6

Snoopy had in fact come to a decision. Presumably she was unable to find her way back to Newport, and the local trees didn't grow bread and milk or provide nests with electric blankets.

After that she settled down to exploring the advantages of her new situation, designating the various spots and pieces of furniture according to her possum business. The bed, and under the bed, was her nest. There were meditation places where she could see outside, the top of the file-card drawers beside the study window, but if it was open when she didn't want it open, so that she wasn't protected from the outside, the opposite window near the desk. Or the soft chair beside the glass door in the lounge, which looked out on to the enclosed part of the veranda, where the bike was parked.

Once she decided to establish herself in this new territory, she found, to her delight, that it was far, far better than what she had before, both inside and outside the house - initially she didn't distinguish clearly between the two, that came only later after it was a matter of shutting the others out, and the window became a psychological focal point, inside safe, outside not. I continued to go with her and bring her back for several weeks, so we explored her new territory together.

As soon as she got the hang of going up and down the smooth-barked sapling across the track, she found it an excellent place to be. Not only was the food very good, but by going up into the topmost branches on a windy night, and lying full length across them, she could get a wonderful ride, the possum equivalent of surfing. Possums on the whole don't like windy nights - they can't hear approaching predators - but Snoopy had me down the bottom of the tree to take care of such matters, and the house was only twenty feet away, so she proceeded to make the most of her advantages.

For a while I would take her out of the door on my shoulder, round the back to the window, then follow the route from Xmas bush to Xmas bush, the last one of which she sometimes liked to go up for a while before proceeding - she used the others only occasionally - until we got to the sapling. She would then go up to feed, play, meditate, making it her main stay for the night. I would wait until she came down at first, then at a later stage, once she had settled in for the night, go back to the house and get on with my own business; hers, by now, was likely to take several hours. After a respectable interval, I'd go out and see whether she was ready to come down, either waiting until she did or going back inside for another hour or so.

When she did deign to come down, I initially continued to reinforce her knowledge of the way back to the window, at first carrying her back along the same route, then letting her come down to the ground of her own accord and follow at my heels or take the lead at will, stopping at each bush, sniffing it and chest-marking it, going up it briefly if she wanted to.

-, Once inside she took up the activities appropriate to those physical conditions: eating her human food at intervals, in the same manner that she browsed outside, and also those leaves which she hadn't had where she'd been outside - I wickedly kept the location of the lone local lantana bush a secret from her for a while scuttling, investigating, poking into al the dark corners, especially where there were discarded shoes or clothes or piles of newspaper, or objects she could pick up and examine with her hands as well as her nose.

One place, however, she avoided, despite its obvious attractions for a possum as she demonstrated in her fondness for like places. The wood-cupboard where I'd tried to make her sleep. Even years later, when she established an alternative nest in the then disused fire-place beside it, she hardly ever put her nose inside it, and never went in except for the briefest exploration.

It was only about a week before she started going out by

herself. I'd meet her at one of the known stops en route, and escort her the rest of the way to the saplings, waiting until she settled in, then leaving her. And it wasn't too long before she started coming back in the window herself, instead of waiting for me to come and get her. When the route and the routine were established, she started to come and go of her own accord. I went out only to check that she was where she was supposed to be, or if I thought there was trouble.

Once back inside, of her own volition she seldom went out again. At first I stayed up with the window open until possum bed-time, but when it became evident that she didn't, in fact, want to go out again, I started closing the window and going to bed myself at about half past twelve or one o'clock, possum bed-time in winter in any case.

I left the window pulled to, but unfastened. She could push it open with her nose, and go out if she wanted to, but it would then swing shut so she couldn't get back. I showed her the process very carefully, and persuaded her to try it for herself - not difficult with an animal so insatiably and innately curious as a possum. She grasped the situation, and naturally had more sense than ever to try going out under those conditions: the worst punishment I could ever inflict on her was to shut her out.

It was nominally an emergency precaution, to let her out in case of fire while I was absent. At least that was the rationalization: in fact I was troubled by guilt about keeping her `in captivity', but, after the first scare, I couldn't bring myself to go to sleep with Snoopy somewhere outside. It was something of a cheat - she could still get out after I went to sleep if she really wanted to, but I knew darn well that she wouldn't. At a later stage it became a necessity, not because of any question of Snoopy's going out, but because of what was almost certain to come in. In fact the guilt was an over-nicety: if Snoopy wanted to change her mind after I shut the window and went to be, then she had only to ask me to let her out - something she could do as easily as a cat or dog.

The arrangement between us was, in fact, quite simple: Snoopy could go out and come back whenever she wanted to, but she didn't have to go out if she didn't want to.

She was still very undersized, and still sometimes had to make two or three attempts before she could get up a tree, so food and facilities had to be provided for her inside.

I found out her tastes in local leaves gradually, over the years, by the same method I'd used with Joey: passionfruit leaves (but not the fruit, even split with sugar and cream); about three different kinds of gum leaves; a bush that grows along the creek, `black wattle', *calicoma serratifolia*, a staple for all the local possums; and a highly unlikely-looking acacia, resembling nothing so much as a bush with dead grass instead of leaves, even when thoroughly alive. In addition, there were the old faithfuls, lantana and casuarina. I watched what she ate outside, then brought some in, preferably from the same plant, as possums are rather like wine connoisseurs in this respect. Failing that, I took my stock from the nearest plant I could reach, and later, when I located all the different sources around for each variety, rotated them so as to cause no lasting damage to any one plant. Ultimately, I kept a supply always available, in three jars or small buckets in various places inside, with her human food dish placed separately. She went from one to the other, browsing at intervals, visiting each when she felt like it, just as she did with the original trees outside.

On occasions she felt the necessity to assert her adulthood and independence, and went out and ate precisely the same leaves from precisely

the same trees, ignoring my offerings and returning only when she wanted to go to bed. If I went out looking for her when she was in that mood she would often still come down the tree and sit with me, just above my head, and in due course come back to the house with me, but while she was normally happy to accept a lift, in her independent mood she would simply get off my shoulder and stalk ahead with great dignity. Being carried is definitely for baby possums. She was happy enough to be carried, for pleasure or convenience, if there was no question of her adulthood being impugned, but in the rare moods when this became an issue, it was out. She had to show that she could do everything for herself.

For the most part, however, she went out, for amusement, when she wanted to and not because she had to, browsing only on what was to hand in the place she decided she wanted to be that night, not deliberately seeking out other varieties, but waiting until she returned to the house to eat what I had provided, in comfort.

It was the only arrangement which could have worked. Snoopy could not have survived if necessity had driven her outside every night, willy-nilly. But I guessed at the time, from the general contrasuggestiveness of possums and Snoopy in particular, what's been confirmed by my experience since. If I'd tried to keep her shut in, she would have got out one night, somehow, and gone, still badly physically debilitated, and totally inexperienced.

Closed doors - for example to rooms at Newport - simply had that effect on her. She was never satisfied until she knew, from her own investigation, that there was nothing of particular interest on the other side. It wouldn't have mattered what facilities I provided inside.

She wasn't competent to cope with the world on her own for an extended period, forced out every night to get food, but she wasn't a cripple, either. She knew her own limitations, and once she knew what the conditions were outside, she could exercise her own judgment, without the compulsion of innate curiosity.

She proceeded to do so. Each evening, like every other possum, she surveyed the outside world long and hard before venturing into it. The difference lay in what came next. If she saw that there was something dangerous, or that the weather was unpleasant, or decided that she just didn't feel inclined to go out that night, she simply got down from the window and took up her indoor activities.

The fact that she knew she had her freedom also meant that I was permitted to curtail it occasionally. If I knew that there'd been a stray dog or fox in the neighbourhood, or that there were bushfires close by, or trouble of a different nature, with guns being let off, I could keep her in that night. For the most part she hardly noticed. Outside was where she went for amusement: her core territory and her main business was inside. On the very rare occasions when she did particularly want to go, I got a very disappointed little possum, who nevertheless accepted my decision, and found herself something else to do.

It was a good system, as long as it lasted, but we'd only just begun to develop it when she added a new element. Only about a week or so after she returned the first time, when she came down the gum sapling after a brief period aloft, instead of heading back towards the house she took off down the track towards Chiltern Road. With me after her. True to form, she headed for the biggest tree in sight, a rough-bark blue gum.

The lowest fork was about three or four feet above the ground, and she made several futile attempts to get up it from the side facing the track. Her desire for that tree was all too evident, so I helped her up, and she scampered up the slightly inclined trunk to the lowest branches,

about twenty feet above ground level. I hastily picked up a fallen branch from nearby and made an easy way up to the bottom fork for her. It was very clear that that was Snoopy's tree, *par excellence*, and though I made attempts to persuade her that others closer to the house were just as good, I made no impression.

Even I could see its advantages. Once up there, with plenty of choice food, she could perambulate nearly twenty feet from one side of it to the other, without any difficulty. It was a very large tree, about the same size as the cedar wattle at Newport, with a secondary, smaller trunk coming off from the lowest fork. A choice tree for any possum.

Particularly at the beginning, I spent a lot of time under that tree, and I got to know it almost as well as she did, which parts she preferred to sit in, which branches she used to get from one to the other, where the choice young leaves were within possum reach, where, inevitably, there was foliage so dense that a possum could remain in there undetected, and places where any noise of a certain kind was likely to mean the presence of a possum. I didn't always have to see her to know that she was there.

It was indeed Snoopy's tree, and after several months she knew it thoroughly, pioneering a route up the far side of the trunk, the way she always came down, ignoring my branch to the fork, for which she had at first been so grateful. There were no holes in that tree, but there were, at that time, a couple of very deep forks, where a possum could remain hidden throughout the day. I wouldn't be at all surprised if that was where Snoopy went when she went missing for three days.

For a considerable time that remained her favourite and almost exclusive haunt. The route remained the same, first via the Xmas bushes, then to the saplings (where she would spend half an hour or so), or straight to her own big gum (if better things there proved more attractive). I could always locate her somewhere along the route, if I knew where to look. We went through a kind of abbreviated version of the old routine. At first I stayed with her, then I simply went out and visited her to make sure she was all right, going out again to collect her later; then she started coming and going herself, and I went out only if I thought there was trouble, or if she were overdue, or, if it was a nice night and I had an hour to spare, for the pleasure of her company. At first I carried her back to the beginning of the known route, near the saplings, from where she could walk herself - or race ahead to cross the clear ground quickly; later, as her confidence increased, she started coming and going the whole way under her own steam.

In due course, however, as her confidence in her own ability to cope with the situation and get herself home increased, the arrangement for collecting Snoopy was analogous to that about her going out. If I wanted her, I could go out and call her. Sometimes she was ready to come, sometimes she wasn't. I just had to wait until she indicated she was ready, either by starting off in the direction of the house herself, or by giving clear indication that she wanted to go in, getting on my shoulder, and, with gesture, sniffling and attitude, making her meaning plain. For she also came down for other reasons, to sit with me for a while, or to go to another nearby tree.

There could be no question of my catching her, taking her by force. If she'd ever got into the habit of associating my arrival with undesirable consequences, of running from me on sight, I'd stand no chance of helping her in an emergency. She had to come to me.

There were, of course, variations and riders. I might persuade, cajole, order or threaten. In the beginning, I could use the sort of emotional blackmail that worked on Joey and Snoopy as babies, since the combination of new surroundings and the fact that her physical and

psychological development had been retarded by conditions meant that in some sense she was still, emotionally, a baby. We could have a rather sulky sort of conversation, with much childish play-acting on both sides:-

`Are you coming down?' `No.' `I'll go without you!' `Alright, go then.' A few yards up the track, out of sight, with very deliberate movements, then back. `Changed your mind yet'. `No.' `All right, I'm really going this time.' `Go then, I don't care.' `Look, I'm really going, I'm hurrying, you'll be left behind.' `Hey, wait for me, wait for me!'

In due course, however, as her confidence in her own ability to cope with the situation and get herself home increased, the final answer, more and more often, was, `No, I don't want to come yet.' And I could like it or lump it, return to the house or, if I thought I had real cause for anxiety, wait until she did decide to come.

Even after threats of leaving her alone no longer proved effective, there was another I could use, turning out the house-lights, `I'm going to sleep without you.' That worked, but I soon gave it up. I was a lie in any case - I wasn't going to sleep while Snoopy was still outside

Once the principle was established, and particularly when she matured, and was no longer a flighty, curious youngster, she usually did come quite quickly, in answer to my entreaties, especially if it was evident that I was distressed. As long as she was with me, from babyhood to middle age, Snoopy liked to please me, and tried to do so in every possible way.

There was, of course, a rider to the system. If she came, got on my shoulder, and gave indications that she was ready to go home, then changed her mind en route, I was entitled to enforce my decision by taking a loose hold on her tail. When I could, I let her have her way, and went with her to explore whatever had caught her attention, but if at that point I insisted she played by the rules. It was `a fair catch', a phrase, or rather frequently repeated series of sounds, which she appeared to know and understand.

A lot of the ground rules had in fact been worked out already at Newport, so that once both parties knew and accepted them under the new conditions, my presence with her in the bush was welcome, and a source of pleasure to us both. She would come down her tree and sit beside me, or on my shoulder, and we would watch the bush and its inhabitants together. Whatever was wrong with her back legs, Snoopy was a young healthy possum, with her senses more acute, and her curiosity still more marked, than my old tutor Mrs. Poss. And our system of communications was already far better developed. I learnt more about the bush and the nocturnal animal life - birds, insects, ring-tails, rats and mice, bandicoots and the occasional dog or wallaby - with Snoopy in those first few months, as she herself learned, and explored her territory, than I could have learnt in a lifetime by any other method. And she liked having me there, and I liked being with her.

Once she'd made the big gum thoroughly her own, she became more ambitious. At first I would always find her there, or in an adjacent sapling, or somewhere on the route back to the house. But then, more and more frequently, I couldn't find her anywhere. Her big gum assumed the significance of the cedar wattle with Joey at Newport. If I wanted to, I could wait beside it, giving her a call occasionally, and eventually, somewhere between half an hour and a four hours later, she would duly appear out of the bushes, a little upstream.

I didn't fancy that situation very much, so I started going out with her again, and following to see where she went.

My presence was again welcome. She'd always loved to show off her achievements to me, and she was now delighted to show me what she'd found. She'd take the lead along a wallaby track, setting a brisk pace, but

not too fast for me to follow, stopping to wait for me or giving a sign of her presence if I got left behind, or confused when her route led her through a possum-cum-rabbit track 6 6o 12" high, through dense undergrowth and invisible from above. Being the possum she was, she generally kept to the easier routes, so there was usually a way for me once I found it, around, if not directly in her footsteps.

She would inspect, and point out to me, features of interest, especially the tree she eventually went up, her favourite of the moment, where she'd be for the next few nights, using it as alternative to, or in addition to, her previous haunts. Then, after a week or so, she would once again be nowhere to be found. I'd follow her again, and she'd show me the next place.

Occasionally she would deliberately lose me. When she did that I didn't stand a chance. But for the most part she was proud of her new discoveries, and only too pleased to show them off to me.

And so we gradually explored her territory together. By this time she'd strayed a few yards on to the adjacent block to the south, towards Mona Vale Road. This block had been up for sale since time immemorial. Most of it was cleared and quarried for sand, with extremely bad erosion as the result. There were a couple of derelict sheds towards the back, then an open space, with only a couple of trees, and some very small, weedy seedlings and saplings. The vegetation band with the larger trees along the creek, however, continued. A determined possum could cross from the creek vegetation to the shed, by darting from tree to tree, but there was too much open ground between to make such behaviour frequent or desirable.

About twenty yards upstream from Snoopy's tree, the band of vegetation was broken by a track and a cleared section where the creek was supposed to run through concrete pipes; it looked like an unfinished attempt to give the block access to the road, by making a vehicular crossing over the creek. This formed an obvious possum topographical feature, and when Snoopy pointed out to me, with special emphasis and pride, a tree just this side of it, I pretty well guessed it's significance. She returned to that tree the next time she went out, but was unwilling to go beyond, across the track, even on my shoulder. She simply got off and ran back. That tree, then, marked the boundary of her territory.

As territories go, it was a very good one. Outside, it was about 2 acres in all, including the route back to the house, with 8 or 10 trees, and a plethora of edible vegetation in the main part, near her big gum, with the band of poplars and edible black wattle opposite the house, across our track, and downstream, as far as the next property to the north. As well as that she had the house itself as her core territory, and the possum facilities in it were, as we found out to our cost, held to be the most desirable in the world.

As long as she owned that territory, I found her out of it only once. There were numerous false alarms, and, when I couldn't find her anywhere else, I would follow the creek back up towards Mona Vale Road, since that, at least, was the direction in which she was headed. The vegetation along the creek was very dense, and in places going along the creek, for a human, of necessity meant walking in the creek itself. So I would eventually go back to the house, muddy, dripping, exhausted, in despair, only to find Snoopy sitting up on the bed, rather aggrieved that I had gone off without her, and she couldn't perform her sleep ritual and go to bed.

But on this one occasion I failed to find her anywhere, and, at dawn, she still hadn't returned home. By that time I had reason to be

terrified of Mona Vale Road, so I headed off down the street intending to start from the other end of the vegetation and work back, hoping to intercept her before she got that far. It was now full daylight.

When I scrambled into the scrub where the creek begins, I startled something hiding there and it went up the very last sapling before the cleared ground next to the road. It was Snoopy.

I was afraid she wouldn't know me `out of context'; a lot of possums who will come to your quite unafraid at the house where they are accustomed to seeing you will hide from you in the bush.

But Snoopy knew me at once. Despite her position, and the fact that every instinct tells a possum trapped in daylight to go up a tree and stay there, clinging, till dark, I talked her down in twenty minutes, about the same time it took at home. She dived under my jumper, scrambling frantically to get to the safest place she knew, and then relaxed, a very relieved possum, as I carried her home.

The false alarms were indicative of the final phase of her development towards independence, which had been curtailed by her own physical condition and the presence of so many other possums at Newport. The major break came, as it had done with Joey, though an unfortunate episode, when, unable to find her, I walked round for hours, calling her, and finally stopped at the derelict shed next door for a few minutes to listen. And poor little Snoopy came battling along the way I'd come, through thick grass that was obviously impenetrable jungle to her.

After that, she interpreted my call liberally, in terms of the ultimate result. If she were close to me - thenceforth I stayed put for at least twenty minutes wherever I called, to let her catch up - then she'd come to me, but if she weren't she'd go back home. The more frequently this occurred, the more the advantages of the new system became apparent. And as she became more competent and more confident, she preferred to go home under her own steam.

I also discovered that, like Joey, she was an extremely cautious possum, and now had the physical capability to put that caution into effect. Away from the house, she made darn sure I was the right person before she let me see her, and sometimes I'd be sitting very close to where she must have been for as long as an hour and a half before she revealed her presence. Closer to the house, in her own better known area, she occasionally made it clear that my presence was not required - a possum who looks at you in disgust, then very deliberately turns her back, couldn't be more eloquent.

So, not only couldn't I catch Snoopy against her will, in time I couldn't find her against her will. When the other possums arrived, I'd always be able to spot all of them before I could spot her.

Calling Snoopy therefore became a matter of giving her the opportunity to come to me - putting myself in a central position and staying there, making myself as visually, auditorially and olfactorily conspicuous as possible, putting a strong torch on the topmost branches so that she could see it from a distance, calling loudly and whistling at intervals, smoking, or at least lighting, cigarettes, one after the other, and letting them burn in a lidded cigar tin which I carried to prevent the danger of setting the bush alight.

All this gradually developed over a period of nearly a year, with Snoopy's condition improving all the time, but the strides she made in the first two months were little short of miraculous.

I had brought from Newport a very much undersized, still weedy little possum, with a coat, principally of hair rather than fur, that was still distinctly gingery (though beginning to turn grey), the underside

still not completely covered with white fur. When we made our first return visit, she was a little silver grey like her mother, still only half the size she should have been, still with inadequate hind legs, but with a full coat of excellent fur, and looking very much like a little possum in fine condition.

There would have been a lot of factors involved in this - puberty (the colouration seems to vary with the presence or absence of hormones), just time itself, and the facilities for getting both plenty of exercise without being frightened away by other possums, and plenty of rest in conditions where she knew herself to be completely safe and could relax completely, coupled with absence of stress - she didn't have to go out and cope with the world if she didn't want to, and didn't need to brave bad weather in order to get her food.

But I think it was probably diet that played the greatest part. The quality and variety of vegetation at Ingleside was excellent from a possum point of view, and all the other locals always looked in good condition, except where injury or unrelated illness supervened. Snoopy of her own choice always made the local leaves, whether inside or outside the house, the main part of her diet. But supplementing a possum diet with good human food helps too - both there and at Newport, shabby looking new arrivals have shown the benefits after a couple of weeks.

I didn't really know what good human food consisted of, so I simply let Snoopy have what she wanted. I did let her have sweets, since there seemed no possibility of her ever having to depend on her teeth, once it became evident that she would never be able to cope on her own for an extended period. There were certain sweets she fancied - sugar in her milk and tea, green lime cordial, jelly babies, glacé cherries, and one particular sort of plain honey biscuit. She usually drank one or two budgerigar dishes of milk a night, and one dish of cordial, but the tea and water were *ad lib.* She also checked to make sure jelly baby, biscuit and cherry were present in her dinner, but often only nibbled a little of each, a token gesture like a kid `claiming' a prized biscuit, or ignored them.

Other sorts of sweets, when offered as a treat, were not really acceptable. She would try a little of what I offered, politely, then reject cake, or biscuits, or bread with honey, in favour of plain bread.

The rest of the offering consisted of one to three pieces of bread, depending on whether she was going to share my dinner, as she loved to do, or not, a piece of banana about 1½" long, split in two, two pieces of apple - only Jonathans were really acceptable - about the same size, a piece of carrot about 1" long, also split, one piece of whatever citrus was in season, plus something extra - seasonal fruit such as pears or grapes, vegetables such as tomatoes, or spinach (for which she developed a taste), raw peas (she wouldn't have beans) or cheese, or a tiny bit of meat, or a bit of sweet corn. The `extra' varied according to her taste of the moment.

Of course she never ate all of that, or anything like it, but there was no way of predicting what she wanted on any one particular night. Generally she ate a couple of pieces of bread, one or both pieces of banana, one or both pieces of apple, and more rarely, some or all of the carrot or citrus, plus whatever the special of the day was.

Her taste, like Joey's, was almost infallible. The only mistakes I remember were ones of quantity - she decided that she Must Have chewing gum, taking it out of my mouth with her hands, or pulling it out from my teeth with her own, until a couple of bouts of indigestion persuaded her to refrain, and she similarly found that over-indulgence in her favourite `dead grass tree' acacia had equally bad results, and so moderated her appetite for it.

Visits to Newport When the time came to visit Newport again for a couple of days, I was in a bit of a quandary about what to do about Snoopy. She had already made it clear that she hated me to leave her alone at night - she could go outside herself if she were in the mood, knowing that I was in the house if she wanted me, but to have loneliness inflicted on her against her will was something that hurt her very much. Solitude and loneliness are two different things. So I decided, once she'd settled in at Ingleside, to take her with me. The first couple of times I arranged to get a lift, taking her with me in her airways bag, while she was asleep in the daytime.

In our absence my room had been repainted, and the furniture replaced and altered in arrangement. The bed was now along one wall, and at right angles to its old position. The lantana outside the window was gone, too.

Snoopy was clearly very perplexed. It was a place that was familiar, but also wasn't. I put her under the bedcover when I arrived, but that was too exposed a position in the new unknown conditions, and she promptly took refuge under the bed.

She came out very cautiously after dark, the first night, and showed every sign of confusion. There were things that were wrong - her food and leaves were there, and so was the bed, and so was the window, and so was I, but we were all somehow in the wrong place.

And she couldn't find her proper scuttling place. She went back to the original door, for a while, and tried, but it no longer related to the bed and the food dish as it was supposed to. So she tried the wardrobe, which, with the bed in its new position, did fulfil the requirements of the key relationship. She therefore decided that that would be her main scuttling place, with the door as an alternative, for a change, on occasion.

Once that all-important question was settled, she proceeded to make the most of her surroundings, developing a separate Newport routine for the key objects (see Fig.). She had a bed, food, and a scuttling place inside the room, with dark corners for exploration or meditation, and a window with a flyscreen - still an excellent place for sitting, watching, listening and smelling out, without danger of other possums coming in. Once again, opening the flyscreen so that she could go out proved the reverse of what she wanted - she'd simply get down off the window ledge and go somewhere else.

Beyond the room, she had access to the dimly lit hall, which proved a good place for taking some exercise, wandering up and down, and, in later times, when she had finally established her habits and knew her surroundings thoroughly, a very occasional scuttling place. The dark corner at one end, with a couple of steps leading to the older part of the house, was a good place for dozing or meditating, and the nearby door to outside, also generally open with a flyscreen over it, was an excellent place for sitting and watching the world go by, the equivalent of a possum safely ensconced in the top of a tree. Again, opening the doors was <u>not</u> what she wanted.

The hall leads, at the other end, into a brightly lit lounge room, somewhere she didn't care to go, except for occasional expeditions to retrieve me when I overstayed and she wanted to go to bed, or investigate feet under the table. She'd got over toe-chasing, but new, friendly feet, in circumstances where she considered herself to be safe, were always a matter of great interest and pleasure.

She liked people in general, again provided she was in circumstances where she knew she was safe and provided, always, that she was in the right mood. A lot of people saw her, and petted her, at Newport, particularly while she was the sleeping angel of the daytime. Sometimes she

wouldn't have a bar of it, and headed straight back for her bed; usually she would look at me questioningly, and when I reassured her that she was safe, accepted what was going on; sometimes she plainly revelled in the attention. Most people saw her as I did, as a baby in a woolly jump suit or live teddy bear or miniature wallaby. In that state she exuded calm and contentment and reassurance, and had a soothing effect on shy human toddlers.

Most people, however, saw her at Newport, which was only her second home, and where she was never quite at her best. At Ingleside, after an initial retreat to the bedroom and prudent surveillance for a time, she was usually delighted to receive visitors, particularly my family, whom she knew and liked, provided they didn't occupy any of the key positions she inspected every night when she got up, where only the Right Person was supposed to be. While she liked people, and meeting new ones was an occasional diversion, she was, essentially a one person possum.

She never met anyone who didn't at least make a show of liking her. Those very few people who looked at her and saw an overgrown rat simply kept their hands off her.

Beside my bedroom at Newport there is a bathroom, and at the end of the hall the door leading to the older part of the house, both areas forbidden to possums. Naturally, closed doors excited her attention, and she made every effort to get through them, waiting until someone opened them then darting between their legs.

She was promptly retrieved, but even more determined to try again. She wasn't allowed there, although her humans went there. Therefore there was something on the other side of those doors, something good, undoubtedly, for possums.

The longer it went on, the more convinced she became. It was the same situation as the top of the wardrobe in her baby days. Possum heaven must be behind those closed doors.

I tried letting her in to investigate: the bathroom, with its assortment of strange furniture and gadgetry continued to intrigue her. Gadgets of all descriptions always intrigued her, until she investigated them for herself, and I demonstrated their action, slowly and clearly and repeatedly so that she could formulate an opinion - what, I haven't the slightest idea - and accept them as part of the set-up. But the bathroom furniture remained beyond her comprehension, and so retained its attraction. I demonstrated the function of the shower, with her underneath, but even that didn't convince her that there was nothing good for possums there.

She got herself into the older part of the house on occasion, too, and took what opportunities she was given to explore it. But she rarely penetrated to my parents' bedroom, particularly after the house was remodelled so that an extra door was added.

By that time she had finally managed to get herself up on top of my wardrobe - not up the door jambs, of course, but up the door when it was left ajar. Fortunately she appeared to have forgotten her baby expectations by that stage, but at any rate she now knew that possum heaven didn't lie there. So I wasn't particularly anxious to disillusion her about that last closed door.

As she grew older, and settled into middle age, she developed her activities and Newport routine more fully and was less interested in such exploratory activities than when she was a curious youngster. But the attempted intrusions into my parents' bedroom still made a pleasant adventure for her from time to time.

When she was at Newport I reverted to taking her out at night, either on my shoulder or walking with me, to avoid disastrous incidents with Other Possums. Once she was in the habit of coming and going herself at

Ingleside my company became something of a rare treat, so she was happy to adopt the new plan at Newport. We'd explore the places up the creek, which the others visited less frequently, with Snoopy on my shoulder, sniffing and looking and listening with great excitement and delight, turning back to me and sniffling in my ear, then turning back to the wonderful novelty that had caught her attention, `Oh isn't it good! Isn't it wonderful to be alive, and here, just now!'

On one occasion, I remember, when she was one two years old, we went up to look at the last few remaining fire-flies, out of the hundreds which used to appear every year when we first moved to Newport. This time she rode on my father's shoulder, alert and eager, chattering away in his ear all the while. The fire-flies themselves didn't impress her very much, but the walk, and the night, and the trees, and two trusted humans to share it with was all very, very good. We left the last half dozen fire-flies in the tiny remaining patch of virgin bush, and Snoopy rode back to the house on my shoulder, excited and chattering all the way.

I think that just about says it all, as far as the remaining wildlife in this district is concerned.

There was one particular tree at Newport which became especially hers. It resembles a pittosporum in appearance, but has a darker green leaf, and pittosporum itself is, as far as I know, inedible to possums - certainly not preferred. The tree - or shrub - in question is a weakling, subject to rot and disease, and so comparatively rare. There were none in our particular part of Ingleside, so Snoopy considered its leaves a delicacy.

Two small specimens grew at Newport, near a group of cabbage tree palms, in a kind of possum no-man's land where I first encountered Sally, frequented by the other possums only when the palms are in flower. These two little trees not only provided her favourite leaves, but also interlaced their branches so that even Snoopy could move from one to the other, without needing to jump. And the thin, uppermost branches moved easily in a moderate wind, wonderful for `surfing', as Snoopy soon discovered. The only disadvantage was that the view was limited, but when she wanted a panorama, back over Pittwater, as far as the tops of the hills above Bayview, she could go up the adjacent cabbage tree palm.

I can remember only two occasions when we were, in fact, disturbed by any of the locals. Once, not long after we'd found the place, was by Foxy, who hoped I'd give her something to eat. I did so, and we retreated. Foxy, though she gave way to Jenny near the house, was a senior territory-holder in her own right, and I had no wish to involve Snoopy in an argument with her, or, for that matter, distress Foxy by forcibly revoking any of her prerogatives.

The second occasion was years later, when a small female, an adult however, also approached me for food. It looked like Little Brat, a granddaughter of Jenny's who, like her mother, reversed the usual process by earning her soubriquet in babyhood, then growing into a very nice-natured possum. As a youngster, she had been one of the most frequent visitors to my window when Snoopy was there, but when she matured she'd taken up residence somewhere unknown, but nearby, appearing in the feed group only occasionally, at one stage with a baby of her own. I wasn't familiar enough with all the Newport possums at that stage to be sure.

Little Brat, if it was her, apparently didn't notice Snoopy at first, coming straight to me. Snoopy, who was then about three and nearly fully grown, a third again the size of the stranger, jumped on her. The smaller possum, startled and bewildered by the sudden advent of a larger female, took off a short distance into the bushes. But then she stopped,

and thought it over, and returned to the fray. This time it was Snoopy who was chased, and disappeared into the bushes for about half an hour, before sneaking back to me.

It was nice for Snoopy to have minor victories sometimes, when there was no damage to either possum, but it was salutary for her to learn that they were neither real nor lasting.

The smaller possum, in the meantime, accepted an apology from me and went up the cabbage tree palm. Those palms are constructed so that a possum can nest there temporarily, until something better becomes available. She may have been living there at the time. So I took Snoopy back to the house and kept her away from there for the rest of the visit, using other trees not particularly fancied by the rest. The other possum was small enough to be encountering difficulties of her own, and Snoopy, after all, did have somewhere else to be. I never saw the smaller one there again, however, and on our next visit Snoopy was once more the temporary owner of those trees.

Snoopy always loved being given presents. The social aspect, the giving of the present, was always more important than what she actually got - a piece of apple, from the same apple as that in her dish, would be received rapturously, while the pieces in her dish would be ignored. But the presents she liked most were exotic leaves from her Newport tree, collected and brought home to her at Ingleside, when I happened to make a brief visit to my parents during the day.

The other regular possums at Newport continued to accord Snoopy the same peripheral status she'd always enjoyed. The older ones perhaps remembered, the younger ones soon discovered, that she lived in my room and posed no threat to either food supply or nests. She also smelled of her associates, and clearly belonged to the humans in the house, who fed them, and so both belonged to the place and was prized by people whom it was politic not to offend.

Snoopy, on her part, varied her attitude to the others according to her mood. I usually took her out on my shoulder when my mother fed the others, to see the circus. Sometimes, particularly when she was young and small, she was frightened by the sight of so many Other Possums, especially if I got too close. When that was the case, we just removed ourselves from their vicinity. But more often she was interested, and liked to watch from a respectable distance: it was fun to see the primitive natives in their natural habitat, provided she wasn't expected to be one of them.

Outside, for the most part, we did maintain a respectful distance from the others, and they, in turn, kept theirs. There were very few actual encounters. Once Snoopy got too close to Foxy during the feeding, and was duly chased. A couple of times one or the other of the males made tentative advances, which she rejected - I did indeed take her to Newport for that purpose when we lacked a resident male at Ingleside, but I was always a couple of days too early, or a couple of days too late, and the timing has to be exactly right.

Inside the room was a different matter. A possum performing normal possum activities inside a house, and obviously enjoying doing so, is always something to be investigated. So investigate they did. No sooner would we arrive than a stream of possums would start to show up at the window - Jenny, Joe, Toots, Little Brat, all houselings - in particular. They were all thoroughly fascinated by the proceedings, and, confirming by sight what their noses had already told them, concerned themselves with how they might get some of her dinner for themselves.

The first couple of times it happened Snoopy dashed over the other side of the room, faced desperately away from the window, and scuttled

frantically. She just didn't want to know what was out there, and retired into her fantasy world. A sudden arrival, in particular, was likely to produce a brief period of panic, especially if I opened the flyscreen, which creaked, to give the possum something - some of them wouldn't go away until I did.

Gradually, however, she became accustomed to such visitors: she simply ignored them, confident that they weren't going to be allowed in. Often she was asleep when they came, anyway - there were less things for her to do at Newport, so she tended to make an early night of it, particularly if she could persuade me to get into bed and read, so that she could snuggle up against me. The last few times we were down there, however, she started to turn the tables, peering back out at them, threatening occasionally. The flyscreen, as always, proved a great boon to both parties, as each could smell and see the other close up, and satisfy his or her curiosity, without any risk of an actual fight.

I tried to make the visits to Newport a treat for Snoopy, and for the most part that's what they were. She got all the food she liked on offer, instead of just some of it, and a taste of anything I got, for example from Christmas dinner. Novelties to explore, freedom from the responsibility of policing her territory - in short she could enjoy the luxury of being a baby again - with almost exclusive possession of me, outside and inside, as the visits were in the nature of a holiday for me, too, usually at Christmas and Easter or on birthdays, and I left my own work behind.

She always had to re-orientate herself when we first arrived, and usually got into bed beside me, for the sake of security, the first night we spent there, but after that settled in to enjoy herself for a few nights, and, as time went on, became less surprised when she woke up the first night and found herself in new surroundings - these were now her surroundings, too.

She would have known she wasn't too far from home - the place at Newport is a kind of double earshot from Ingleside: a distinctive bird, like the koel (rainbird) when he first arrived and there was only one, calling just within hearing roughly to the NNE at Ingleside, could be just heard to the SSW when we reached Newport, about twenty minutes later.

But although Snoopy enjoyed the break at Newport, three or four nights was enough, and then she wanted to go home. Her freedom was restricted at Newport, the bed wasn't as spacious or comfortable, and, above all, she had business to attend to at Ingleside - her house, her territory to be inspected, to make sure no Other Possums had taken over in her absence, chest-marks and scent trails to be renewed.

Motorbike

I had never risked taking Joey on the motor scooter with me, even when he was asleep in the daytime, but Snoopy was so docile and well-behaved in the day - I could have done anything with her person, provided I didn't wake her fully - that I decided to give it a go. Given the non-existence of public transport at Ingleside, and the fact that it can take up to an hour to get a taxi, it seemed advisable to find a way of getting her to the vet in a hurry, in case of an emergency. About the third time I was going back to Newport, I put her in her airways bag, put it over my shoulder, and set off, very slowly.

She was as quiet as a lamb, stretching out on her back, totally relaxed, blissfully asleep.

After a couple of times it became clear that she not only tolerated such treatment, she liked it. And after a few more times, it became clear that she not only liked it - she loved it. Even if I woke her too suddenly when I put her in her bag and she started to panic, as soon as

we got under way she would relax, stretch out on her back, and go happily back to sleep.

I can only guess why. The first bike she rode on was the little 50 cc. Honda four-stroke scooter. The hills around here being what they are, it was often necessary to open the throttle full. When that happened, the strong four-four beat sounded through the general engine noise very clearly. That, combined with her pendant situation in the airways bag, must have given an impression, a set of stimuli, very much like that of being in her mother's pouch - the heartbeat, the swinging motions as her mother sped through the trees, the great roar as she chased all Other Possums right away. Tucked up comfortably in the pouch of a mother that big and that fierce, any possum in the world has the right to feel safe.

One of Snoopy's favourite meditation places at Ingleside was the chair inside the glass door in the lounge, which looked out on to the closed part of the veranda, where the bike was parked. During meditation periods, possums are for the most part staring into space, eyes unfocussed, unaware of their surroundings. But every so often they do come to, and look, and when that happened, the only thing Snoopy could see from that position was the bike - hour after hour, night after night, year after year.

After about a year I had to change the little ½ horsepower step-through for a slightly larger 125 cc. The smaller bike couldn't cope with hills like Tumbledown Dick without involving being passed at speed, too close, by larger vehicles, whether or not I pulled over to the left. Light bikes like that are very susceptible to cross-winds, including slipstream from passing vehicles, and can be blown three or four feet either way, easily; passing them fast and close is a good recipe for tragedy. As the volume of traffic increased, so did the risks involved in using the 50, so, fond as Snoopy and I were of it, it had to go. Fortunately, and totally unintentionally, she was given the chance to make an easy transition - I didn't sell the 50 immediately, so for several weeks both were parked outside her meditation place, side by side.

She didn't like the newcomer as much as her old friend at first, as the four-four beat wasn't as clear - the throttle didn't need to be open so far over the roads Snoopy travelled. But she gradually transferred her affection to it, and accepted it as she had accepted its predecessor.

I never risked taking Snoopy on the bike at night, when she was fully awake, not because there was any doubt about her enjoying it, but because she was likely to enjoy it too much, become excited, and do something disastrous.

She did, however, travel in a car at night, three or four times I think. The first time she was frightened by the motion and the passing flashing lights, but thereafter she found it extremely interesting and exciting, standing up on her hind legs to watch out the window, like a dog.

The only problem was that she realised who was actually in control, who was doing the driving, as she knew, however vaguely, that it was I who was driving the bike. I wasn't the car driver, so she kept insisting on making a bee-line for my father, who was, trying to climb on his shoulder, and getting in the way of the workings. No matter where I put her, she was back to Mumma-in-control the next minute. In the end I had to keep hold of her tail, the only suitable, non-injurious `handle' of the possum anatomy.

Sextus - First Mating

When we first moved up to Ingleside, we didn't lay eyes on another possum for some time, although we occasionally heard them in the distance. I was a bit worried that there weren't any other possums around for company for her, however distant the relationship. Snoopy, of course, couldn't have been happier.

In any case the situation changed, temporarily, about six weeks after we arrived - about the end of April, 1971, I think. Snoopy was up the gum sapling near the house, and I was inside, when I heard the rumpus.

Snoopy was on the end of one of the topmost branches, and a young, small male, with red patches starting to show, but not much bigger than she was, was starting to court her. He was polite, duly accepting the blows to his snout without animosity, dutifully retreating when she grew too vehement, but never beyond the end of the same branch, so that she could get away. Any other possum would have been able to escape from her position - a two foot jump was all that was required - so no doubt he took her failure to do so as a sign of forthcoming compliance.

Snoopy, of course, was terrified. She was trapped, and had no idea what this strange Other Possum could want with her, except to attack her.

I wasn't particularly keen for Snoopy to mate in her first season: a lot of possums don't. She was very much undersized, and her back legs seemed inadequate to carry the extra burden of a baby. Besides, I didn't really know what had been wrong with her as a baby: giving Snoopy a life was one thing, but I didn't fancy the thought of propagating a weak strain, to the detriment of the species. I thought the fault had lain with her mother - the genealogy could supply an explanation, for Jenny was unusually prolific, and had one baby after another, probably too many. But I didn't, and don't know.[s] All in all, I didn't fancy the idea - and furthermore, Snoopy was petrified.

There wasn't much I could do, given their present position, except offer moral support. Snoopy seemed encouraged when I first arrived, apparently expecting me to solve the problem. I remembered how I'd sicked her on in her baby play fights by yelling, `Go, Snoopy, Go!' So I yelled that now, and she redoubled her efforts. He politely retreated, a little further, but still without giving her a clear way off the branch.

I went and got some bread from the house, and tried to distract the male to give Snoopy a chance to escape. He was only too delighted to break for refreshments, and Snoopy, after a moment's hesitation, tried to exploit the opportunity. But like most males, he gobbled the offering up quickly, and she was only about half way down when he finished, and flew to cut her off.

Snoopy was in no immediate danger, but, in her present state of mind, if she did get down, or fall down, she was likely to run anywhere in panic. All I could do was park down the bottom of the tree and wait to intercept her.

And so we proceeded, for the rest of the night. At intervals, I would try to distract the male with food. As before, he was only too willing to be temporarily distracted, and Snoopy would start to escape, going the long way round through the branches. As before, he would finish his meal, and cover the same distance she'd gone in a single jump, cutting her off again. Or, when he'd courted persistently for an hour or thereabouts, and had her where she couldn't get away quickly, he'd start to browse on the tree for a bit. She'd eat a little too, then start to try to move away - he'd break off and pursue her, cornering her, and then it would start all over again.

He was a very patient, but very young and enthusiastic male, and it was dawn by the time he decided to go home to bed. It took me another

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s. The results, in any case, suggest that Snoopy's problems weren't hereditary - she had six known descendants, without any abnormality.

half hour to reassure Snoopy, and coax her down.

The next night, when she went out to her saplings, her suitor promptly reappeared. He was a compact little chap, like the other locals tending towards brownish grey rather than true silver grey, with a broad triangular head and blunt features, and very short ears - not pretty, to my taste, but he was gentle, and patient, and not too big, and all I could have wanted for Snoopy for her first time. I dubbed him Sextus Possumus Rufus - he had his red shoulders, and he was the sixth male possum I'd known, but there was another reason, too.

Snoopy was a little more sanguine about the proceedings this time. She was still alarmed by his advances, and still repelled him with great vehemence, but she was beginning to realise that, whatever the silly fellow wanted, it wasn't to eat her.

Reaction to a strange female

On about the third night, Sextus brought another possum with him, a large adult female. She went up one sapling; Snoopy and Sextus were up the other. She and Snoopy spent the next few hours determinedly Not Seeing each other. Snoopy saw a large female, with whom she, knowing her own limitations, had no intention of tangling; the stranger saw a young, small female, but not apparently a disabled one, in her own territory, close to her actual nest. Snoopy 's failure to escape Sextus would merely have indicated that the courtship was further along than it actually was. And she had no intention of risking a serious fight under those circumstances.

And all the while, Sextus, now closer, importuned Snoopy unceasingly.

Snoopy was beginning to get the idea now, but she was once more trapped, Sextus in one direction, the strange female in the other. I tried to lure the female away with food - she was a new and undesirable element. She was shyer than Sextus, and wouldn't come down to me, so I tried putting food on the branches and backing off. She would come and collect it, then take it back up to her former position to eat it.

Finally, about 2 o'clock, she departed, and we never saw her there again. I suspect she may have been a possum I discovered on one of the false alarms, living on the other side of Chiltern Road, barked at each evening, by arrangement, by the same unchained dog, who had no intention of doing anything more. She may have been attracted by the sound effects accompanying the courtship in the neighbouring, previously unoccupied territory. At any rate, she apparently decided there was nothing here for her - the territory had an owner, if she was the possum I thought then she herself got regular hand-outs up the street, and Sextus, clearly, had eyes only for Snoopy at the moment.

Sextus, of course, remained until dawn, and came back the next night. By this time Snoopy was very obviously getting the idea, and they adjourned to the Xmas bushes beside the house. I left them to work it out for themselves and went back inside. A little later I heard them behind the tank near the study window. I looked out, and saw them in the boxing position, sitting upright, front paws used as arms. Then Sextus, very slowly, made a mock blow, and gently and tenderly patted Snoopy's cheek. And she replied, with the softest, gentlest, most affectionate touch on his.

Mock aggression to indicate affection

Snoopy was in love. It was all I could have asked for her. Through a mistaken sense of delicacy, I went away, but then I heard her hissing quietly, in a manner I'd never heard before. I looked out and saw them mating. Then they uncoupled, and Sextus jumped up on the tank stand, and crowed his triumph.[xxii] Then he disappeared into the night, and we never saw him again.

Snoopy came straight inside and put herself to bed.

I still hoped that the mating would prove unsuccessful - a lot of young females fail to produce live offspring the first time - but about four weeks later, when Snoopy was playing about beside me in the lowest fork of her big gum, I noticed that her abdomen appeared to be very, very slightly distended. It was only because I knew her so well that I picked it up - no one else would have noticed, and I wouldn't have noticed it in any other possum. But with Snoopy, I was pretty sure.

I took her to the vet, for the first time in her life. He couldn't tell whether she was pregnant or not, but said she was in excellent condition, all animals in fact improve their health when pregnant, the baby would be quite minute when it was born, and she should have no trouble.

So I decided to let nature take its course. She still might lose the baby. If it showed any signs of abnormality when it came out of the pouch, then I would do the necessary, quickly, before I changed my mind. If it was normal, but she had difficulties, then I could help raise it - I laid in a supply of toy baby doll's bottles. In the meantime, everything seemed to be going well, so I hoped for the best, and was, in fact, delighted for her sake.

A couple of weeks later there was a small patch of blood on the bedclothes. Snoopy didn't seem to know anything untoward had occurred, but she was rather tired, and put herself back under the bed after she'd had her dinner. She stayed in, and took it easy, the next night, too.

Growing pains

About that time something quite unprecedented happened. Until then she'd behaved towards me as all baby possums behave towards their mothers - gentle, and loving, and very, very affectionate. Even when I made silly moves, like following her up a Xmas bush, and she swung round on a reflex action, she only warned me, stopping herself before she bit me.

One night, however, without any apparent provocation, she bit me. I thought it must have been an accident, and treated it as such, but it happened again, and kept happening.

When I got over my surprise, I realised that Snoopy quite literally couldn't help it. Her mood would change, and she simply had to bite me - her actions were compulsive - and then she would be the affectionate, loving little possum I'd always known again.

Certain situations made it impossible for her not to bite me - a retreating calf had the same effect as an aggression stimulus as a retreating rump. I tried avoiding such situations, and getting out of her way when the mood took her, but that seemed to make matters worse for her. She had to bite someone, and removing the target made her more and more frustrated, and more and more distressed. So I took to wearing long boots under my slacks. If she had to bite someone, better me than a strange animal she couldn't handle. Yet with all this she very much <u>didn't</u> want to bite me, and managed to control herself enough to avoid the full, bull-dog grip bite.

When the mood took her, and she ran at me to bite me, she started crying her baby cry at the same time.

I knew that adolescent female possums tend to be nervous and irritable - neurotic, in fact - and that the same applies to possums in early pregnancy. Poor little Snoopy was both at once, so the result was inevitable. There was more to it than that, although I didn't know it at the time: many possums seem to go through this reflexive, `two-possum' stage in adolescence.[xxiii] But above all, conflict between a mother and her growing daughter is inevitable. However, even I could see then that Snoopy couldn't help what she was doing, and was sorrier for her than for me.

Nevertheless, I had to punish her when she bit me. I simply

couldn't let her grow up thinking that humans can be bitten with impunity. I usually pretended very hard that I didn't notice the first bite, but the next time I had to cuff her, and when she got too bad, on two occasions, I shut her outside.

Her terror was so great that the crisis sent her back to an infantile state. Her distress was so extreme, in fact, that the punishment was out of all proportion to the crime. She would have had to take my arm off to merit that.

It was a very distressing situation. Snoopy had to bite me, but she didn't want to bite me, but she had to bite me just the same. I knew she couldn't help it, and I hated to punish her, but I had to punish her just the same. I could only hope that it was just a phase, which we could weather - the other possums who'd showed signs of similar behaviour had calmed down as their pregnancies progressed.

It was clear, even to me, that the overall idea (or rather instinct, since Snoopy tried to stop herself whenever she was actually thinking) was to drive me out of the house and have it all to herself. Well, I wasn't going, and she couldn't go. She was still physically incapable of handling the outside world by herself.

Undesired reflex aggression towards me redirected to an inanimate fetish

There was no one solution, only partial solutions. But it was Snoopy herself who came up with the most effective. I was her mother, therefore in some sense a female possum, Another Possum, in the same nest, and so she had to attack me and drive me out. But I was also her mother, whom she loved very much - between bites she was still as affectionate as ever - and she knew that I really wasn't a possum, I was a non-possum friend whom she was beginning to love in that way, too, and I wasn't really her mother, anyhow - she'd always known that Jenny was her mother.

It was all very complicated. The only way out of her dilemma was to find a way of making two separate people of me, the one that she had to hate and bite, and the one she still loved. So she set about doing so.

Joey, at first, couldn't tell where I actually began and ended, and grew very confused when I took my clothes off - they smelt of me, and he'd thought they were me. Snoopy, at the same stage, was unconscious most of the time, and immobilised, so she never manifested the same confusion. But she'd always associated used clothes, which carried my smell, very closely with me.

So, the next time she had to bite me, she attacked, instead, discarded dirty clothing from the chair next to the bed. She struck and struck again, with uninhibited venom and hatred. And between each blow she turned and glared ferociously at me, `This is you I'm biting.'

After that, things got easier. When her mood became apparent I would give her a suitable fetish, moving it a little to help the illusion of reality. Mostly her attacks then grew so furious that I had to just remove myself from the vicinity till she was finished - when the fury gripped her she simply bit and bit and bit, and no longer distinguished what she was trying to bite. But sometimes, with a great deal of good will on both sides, we even managed to turn it into a game.

Dispute over the bed

She was, however subconsciously, trying to drive me out of her territory, and what she wanted for herself most of all was, naturally, the actual nest, the bed.

After a couple of attacks when I was half asleep, I had to shut her out of the bedroom for a few nights - she could have done too much damage, particularly to eyes and face, if I went to sleep. That, of course, was the last thing she wanted. By this stage she was beginning to be able to <u>think</u> more, and try to control her actions when the rage overtook her, so

a couple of times was enough.

I tried giving her a separate bed beside mine - an old canvas bassinet with her own set of bedclothes - but that went the same way as the box at Newport and the wood-cupboard. Theoretically, it should have been ideal for this particular possum: the hammock effect should have had the same soothing back-in-the-pouch effect as the airways bag on the motorbike. But, while Snoopy at first thought it was an interesting thing to explore, the minute she got the idea that she was supposed to sleep there she rejected it utterly. It finally devolved on the kittens, as a nice wet-weather toy.

In the meantime, Snoopy retired under the bed to sulk. If I wouldn't get out of the bed and let her have it, she was jolly well going to have under it.

But that wasn't the end of the matter. Snoopy would sometimes sleep beside the bed, under any bedclothes that happened to slide down on the floor. Two mornings running I woke up cold and stiff, with the bedclothes on the floor beside the bed and Snoopy asleep underneath.

I assumed she'd capitalised on an accident, but the third night I woke up when I started to get cold, and found the same situation. I pulled the bedclothes back on, and rolled over to go back to sleep.

Snoopy got up on the bed, marched straight down the space between my back and the bedclothes over me, made a smart left turn, facing away from the bed, then jumped, outwards, gripping the bedclothes with all four hands and riding them down, so that the fell to cover her in her former position.

If she had to concede me the top of the bed, she was damn well going to have the bedclothes.

I retrieved my bedclothes, and Snoopy rather sullenly retired under the bed.

That was pretty much the end of the dispute. Snoopy had never made a complete break with her old ways, returning to her former position under the bedcover between antisocial bouts. She continued to make that her main nest, though she also slept under the bed, and, as she matured, began to establish alternative nests for occasional use: either of the two bottom drawers of the wardrobe (which were comparable in difficulty of access, and consequently security, to her occasional nest at Newport, the drawers of the divan, entered from the back through a gap of 1 to 1½"); the disused fire-place in the study; more rarely the dark corner of the bedroom near her leaves, or under the chair next to the bed; once only, each, on top of the fuel stove in the kitchen, masked by a curtain, and under the clothes-horse in the laundry.

KYLIE She was sleeping under the bed-cover, stretched out on her back, one day a couple of weeks after I'd found the patch of blood on the bedclothes. In that state Snoopy was completely docile - I could move her about like a rag doll - but I tried to respect her person by not abusing the privilege. However, stretched out on her back, with her furry underside upwards, she was absolutely irresistible. I'd found that if I rubbed her tummy gently, without waking her, she would just snuggle down a little in her sleep, giving a contented little sigh, and making lip-smacking pleasure noises. Happy dreams. I was doing that on this occasion, when my hand encountered something like a little head under her skin, in her pouch.

There was panic in Snoopy's pouch. Not only had I encountered the head - it had encountered me. It burrowed away as fast as it could under her skin, in the opposite direction.

Two weeks later my curiosity got the better of me, and I looked under the bedcover again. This time I saw it, and when I did I became

eternally grateful that I'd carried out my investigations under the bedcover myself, with only the light of a pencil torch with a low battery. The little creature was quite undeveloped, less than two inches long, and strongly resembling a three months old embryo. Where the eyes should have been, there were only dark patches covered by translucent skin, which was, much, much later, to swell up into a cone, split, then peel back to form the two eyelids.

It was, notwithstanding, a very lively little creature, which promptly burrowed deeper into Mummy's pouch - I'd seen it because, as I already knew, the pouch tends to gape open a little as the mother relaxes her muscles in sleep.

I got out immediately. Snoopy never stirred.

It was in fact more than a week later that Snoopy herself first seemed to discover what was going on.

She was sitting beside her food dish one night, cleaning her pouch as part of her normal grooming, when she started to evince great astonishment. She made the little disgusted, but good-natured, clucking noises she usually reserved for small passing non-possums such as mice. There was a strange little animal. And in there, of all places!

It may be that the acid test of whether Snoopy was or was not *e natura* is her behaviour towards her baby. A few weeks prior to first drafting this, when a tiny baby at the same stage survived its mother's road death, I tried to adopt it out, temporarily, on the largest, strongest, healthiest, most compliant nursing mother I then knew - Honeybunch. Her reaction was just the same as Snoopy's. She made no attempt to mother it, or bite it, or anything. She neither accepted nor rejected it, even when I put it under her nose. It just wasn't a possum to her at that stage.

If you think about it, you can see that makes sense. A great many babies are lost at that stage, when the distension of the pouch just barely begins to show. Once it develops, and as long as it lasts, the bond between a mother and her dependent baby is the strongest emotion in her life. She will in fact give her life for the baby if necessary. To have that bond already developed at a stage when the baby is so likely to die would simply case too much, and too frequent, distress for the mothers.

Snoopy, despite my fears, had no trouble at all with the baby. I caught glimpses of it from time to time, since Snoopy, having a safe house and chair in the lounge to meditate on, interspersed far more, and far more thorough, grooming sessions with her meditations than is usual - the contortions involved make thorough grooming difficult in a tree branch. Cleaning the pouch is always a very important part of female grooming, and Snoopy, knowing she was safe, made no attempt to stop her pouch gaping open while she did this. At such times I was treated to the spectacle of something tiny, but progressively larger and more developed, squirming inside.

All mother possums have difficulty over the last few weeks, when the baby is very large and heavy, but still too young to come out and ride on their backs. Their movements are severely impeded, both by the load and by the awkwardness of the bulging pouch; they are at greater risk whenever they go out. Snoopy got over this difficult period very easily - she just decided to stay inside.

It was at that stage that I discovered for the first time what I later confirmed with other mothers and babies. During those last few weeks the baby in fact sleeps beside its mother when they are in the nest, diving frantically back into her pouch when she starts to go out for the night. Which explains why there are so often bits left hanging out, legs and arms, and tails, and ears, when the mother first arrives at the house.

It was at that stage, too, that all my fears about abnormalities in the baby were relieved. Kylie was about the same age as Joey when he arrived when she started sleeping under the bedcover beside her mother, and a more normal, healthier little poss you couldn't hope to meet.

Purely as a matter of convenience, in order to have a consistent reference point, possums are counted as being `born' on the first day they come out of the pouch. But in practice this usually means the first day they are seen out of the pouch, on their mothers' backs, so in fact several weeks after they are out of the pouch in the nest.

The great day eventually came when Kylie's flying dive failed to get her even partially into the pouch, and she had to scramble on to Snoopy's back, diving back into the pouch at the first opportunity, as soon as Snoopy sat down. But to judge as best I could from Kylie's development at the time, this was a little earlier than the babies first made their appearance in the house feed-group.

For Snoopy, after all, was living in a safe warm house, and there was no reason why the baby couldn't be abroad at a slightly earlier stage than that at which they usually encounter the big outside world.

So I decided that Kylie's birthday would be the night Snoopy first took her outside on her back. In the meantime, as she fitted less and less easily into the pouch, Kylie spent more and more time out of it, but in the house, until she was toddling around a little on her own. Snoopy, you see, having no need go outside, saw no reason to do so when there was any added difficulty.

When the time finally came for the brief transition period that probably cost Joey his mother, and Snoopy made a couple of excursions outside, leaving the baby in the nest, she employed the same expedient as Jenny had employed with Twiddly. She used a baby-sitter, me. When the momentous occasion came, and Kylie went for her first short trip in the open air, she was already very well developed, more so than the biggest baby I've seen make its first appearance.

I give up. Kylie was `born' some time in October, 1971.

For the first three days that Kylie was out of the pouch, Snoopy was very jealous of her, and didn't want me to touch her. So I kept my grubby little paws offa Snoopy's baby. After that, she went slightly the other way, and resented any attention I paid the baby which she considered infringed on her own prerogatives. So I just kept out of it at first, and let Snoopy raise her own baby her own way.

It wasn't long before Snoopy worked the situation out for herself - occasional attention from me, such as babysitting, was welcomed if it helped her, and just accepted as part of the normal set-up, provided it wasn't too frequent.

Snoopy was in fact very proud of her baby, and once she'd got our various roles straight in her own mind, happy to share some of the pleasures, as well as some of the difficulties, with me.

She had every right to be proud of her baby. Kylie was strong, and robust, and as healthy as could be, like Joey, but without even his disadvantages caused by losing his mother. She had all the advantages Snoopy enjoyed, and none of the disadvantages. She was lively, and cute, and loving, and affectionate, and utterly adorable.

And utterly spoilt. If she didn't have two mothers, she at least had one mother and a nanny, and she revelled in that, too. And, like all little possums, she found the big new world a wonderful place to explore and learn about, filled with new and exciting objects, and wonderful, wonderful food. Her name was Kylie, but it inevitably, and irrevocably, became Ki-Ki.

Snoopy raised her very much as I had expected her to. She washed her, and suckled her, and played with her, and took her outside in her trees on her back.

At first I went out too to make sure that Snoopy, with her weak hind legs, could manage the extra load. I remember one night we had a lovely game in the lowest fork of Snoopy's big gum. It was the old game chasings - tipped-you-last, but Ki-Ki had two mothers to use as a base, instead of one. So she raced backwards and forwards between Snoopy and me, receiving a light tap from, or herself tapping, each of us in turn. Ki-Ki thought that was absolutely fabulous. So Snoopy and I had a little game of tennis, with the baby as the ball.

After that, however, I left them pretty much to themselves, as it was clear that Snoopy could manage. Snoopy took Kylie out when she herself felt like going out, and brought her back, either piggy-back or trailing behind. If I felt I had reason to be anxious, I went out and collected them, serially or both at once.

Kylie learned from her mother, by doing the things she did with her. Long, long before she was finally weaned, she started sharing Snoopy's food and leaves, delighting in every new, wonderful taste. She followed Snoopy around the house at first, just as she did outside in the trees, and so learned the proper possum function of all the furniture. Only one thing baffled her. Snoopy's scuttle.

Kylie was a proper little possum in her own right, that is to say, a thoroughgoing pragmatist. She could climb splendidly, and she didn't know anything about inaccessible possum heavens on the tops of wardrobes - Snoopy herself had forgotten about that anyway. Ki-Ki could see no rhyme or reason for this extraordinary activity. After some thought, she apparently consigned it to the realm of life's great imponderables, and left her mother alone when she performed her inexplicable antics, finding herself some business of her own.

Kylie indeed, very early, became far more of a possum than Snoopy could ever be. Snoopy, of her own volition, always stayed in far more than she went out. Even when she went out several nights in a row, on some of those nights she came back in about an hour. That didn't suit Ki-KI at all, and she was only, say, a month old when she started making expeditions of her own.

At first I'd go out and collect her - naturally she went to the trees she knew, Snoopy's trees. All little possums of that size are owl-bait, and I was worried about her being out alone. But she very soon showed that she was a thoroughly competent little possum - I pity any owl that made the mistake of thinking that she was dinner.

She very quickly pioneered an above-ground route instead of the track Snoopy used, through the bushes that lined it on the far side, a route later adopted by all the others in turn. But Snoopy never used it. Bushes, with small convoluted branches, demand far more agility than trees. Although Snoopy was now very much stronger, agility was something she never possessed.

The same was true of the house. Snoopy in fact occupied the house at floor level. There were only a few places where she could get off the floor - the bed, the chairs, the coffee table, and the two places where I had deliberately arranged graduated access: the study window, with a route from the velvet screen to a book case 2'6" high, to the screen again, then to file-card drawers against the window; the window opposite that, where she went chair to desk to more drawers to window.

Ki-Ki, like all the others after her, simply jumped from the floor to the window in one leap. And it wasn't very long before she in fact

occupied the house from floor to ceiling. Just as Snoopy, using same furniture as I did, but for a different purpose, added a new dimension to the house, so Kylie added another one still. All sorts of things which had till now retained their original human function took on a new significance. Like Snoopy, she found a possum purpose for everything within her reach. And everything was within her reach.

Like all little possums she was full of mischief. Imagine the most curious kitten you have ever known, provide it with four very dextrous hands instead of feet, and give it a prehensile tail so that it can dangle from above and use all four hands at once. She was into, under, and on top of, everything. And coupled with her incredible agility was the usual possum concomitant, an equally incredible clumsiness in regard to small moveable objects that meant nothing to her. All breakable objects had to be locked away, something I'd never had to do with Snoopy. But she was so good-natured, and affectionate, and delightful, that nobody could have minded.

Phone calls

Snoopy herself, however, managed to invent some mischief of her own at this point. I'd had the phone put on, and located it near the window beside the desk: that window was on a slide, and didn't open very far. Snoopy was by no means displeased with this addition to her meditation place. She simply climbed up it, using the dial as toe-holds, and knocking the receiver off in the process. Time and again I had to get out of bed to replace the bleating receiver. Quite often she did things in the right order, knocking the receiver off first, then dialling successively anything from one to three digits. I don't know whether I'm sorry or not that she never managed enough to fluke a connection.

Kylie developed rapidly in other ways too. At first she slept with her mother, wherever she happened to be, in, on, or under the bed. (Snoopy, as I'd hoped, had got over her biting phase as her pregnancy progressed, and resumed her former relationship with me.) But Ki-Ki very early objected to having her bowels cleaned out, that being one of the most automatic maternal actions. She experimented with sleeping somewhere else in the bed, but very soon removed herself to the top of the wardrobe, where she found herself a highly suitable nest, an old suitcase which had already had a hole made in it by rats, a hole she proceeded to widen to suit her own convenience.

Snoopy, of course, had never been up the top of that wardrobe; to get there Ki-Ki had to scramble up the narrow gap between the wardrobe and the wall behind, using pressure holds, having first jumped on top of a set of drawers beside the wardrobe. They were about 2'6" high, and so, while not entirely beyond Snoopy by means of a jump and a desperate scramble, difficult enough to discourage her from making the effort to frequently, with other places preferred.

I made matters a bit easier for Kylie by fixing a dead branch from the top of the drawers to the top of the wardrobe. Once Kylie declared herself no longer a baby, to be washed, Snoopy had started to regard her, on occasions, with something like hostility, particularly when she tried to share her dinner.

They were very rare, minor, isolated instances, but straws in the wind, so I started to provide Kylie with a separate smaller dish of food of her own, on top of the chest of drawers, to ease the friction, until I could think what to do with her.

The change was not, of course, abrupt or a complete break. She still came back to Snoopy as her baby, quite frequently, still treated me with the same gentle but lavish affection as always. But by midsummer 1972 she was very much a small possum in her own right.

Outside she still shared her mother's territory quite amicably, though preferred to use a separate main tree. There was a tall gum about the same size as Snoopy's tree a few yards away from it. However, the lowest ten feet or so of trunk was smooth, with few toeholds; Snoopy invariably fell off at the first few attempts whenever she tried to climb it (though she managed it eventually on occasion), and so preferred to leave it alone. Kylie, of course, had no such difficulty, and was to be found most frequently in that tree, which I mentally designated as hers.

ERIK

I hadn't seen Sextus since the night he mated with Snoopy, and therefore presumed he'd either moved on or met an untimely fate. It was about this time that Erik made his entrance.

He was a very large, very red, extremely handsome if somewhat battered possum. He was deep red almost all over - hence his name - with very black contrasting face markings. He was so like Mephistopheles that for over a year I still kept checking his totally undamaged eye for Meph's injury. It was difficult to believe he wasn't Meph.

He introduced himself by the simple process of marching in the study window one night while I was working at my desk with the light on. He came straight across to me, and started rubbing and climbing my legs.

He said, `Nif, nif, nif. Where's da bread and where's da wimmen?' In that order. Always in that order.

I said, `Nyaaaaah!' and shot up on top of the chair.

By this time I'd grown somewhat inured to strange male possums greeting me as a long lost relation. No doubt he'd spied out the house for several days without letting us see him, and discovered that there was a possum in it, ergo a safe house for possums, where possums might be fed. He obviously did, from his own point of view, know both Snoopy and myself, by all-important smell, at least. No doubt, too, there was an element of genuine mistaken identity - he'd been fed by humans before, and knew that the natural function of such creatures was to produce food on demand, and when I came to know him better I suspected that there might, once, have been some special human, probably female, whom he thought he'd found, in all that mattered, once again. And I had no doubt as to his intentions, which were in no way belligerent.

Nevertheless, I had never clapped eyes on him before, he was huge, and I was scared stiff of those enormous great meathooks.

In fact, like almost every other possum I've met, he was incredibly gentle with me. It is difficult to believe how, without being able to retract their claws, they can manage to handle humans so gently; my own cats do worse by accident. Erik, except under extraordinary circumstances which I'll relate later, never at any time left a mark on me.

Kylie was out at the time, and Snoopy was in the bedroom. She was not surprisingly even more terrified by the apparition than I was. He was undoubtedly the biggest possum either of us had seen to that date. In fact he was more than twice Snoopy's size, but at first sight he seemed to me to be about eight times her size. To her, he must have looked like an elephant.

I hastened to comply with his first request, having no wish to test his patience. Snoopy, meantime, had gone into a rather frantic scuttle. He accepted my offering with the appropriate signs of appreciation, and proceeded to explore the rest of the house, to see what was in it for him.

After investigating the study and lounge, he made a tentative entrance into the bedroom, his nose and mind fixed on Snoopy's dinner, but with a wary eye on her, exercising due caution as he approached the nest of the territory holder. She, on her part, recovered herself enough to make a

defiant charge, and put him out, at least as far as the study. He went up on the window sill and thought it over for a while. I gave him a bit more to eat, which he gratefully accepted, and eventually he mooched off.

On the whole, a desirable addition, I thought.

Erik continued to appear at the window, irregularly, from then on. I gave him his handout, and guarded Snoopy's prerogatives, if she were absent. If she was inside, she looked after them herself. Erik, quite clearly, would very much have liked her dinner, but she wouldn't permit it.

He also occasionally came to be fed on the back lawn. I remember one night vividly. It was full moonlight, and the track from the house worn in the grass shone white and clear, save where the dark shadow of the house cut across it. Erik, finishing his dinner, took three steps down the track - and disappeared.

I'd seen something like that before. I knew what he'd done, he'd moved into the shadow and camouflaged himself in its darkness. Of course, that was it. All I had to do was look steadily into the shadow for a few minutes, till my eyes adjusted to the lower light, and I would spot him, a darker blot against the darkness.

I waited, but I still didn't see him. I moved into the shadow myself - it was no more than about five feet wide - readjusted my eyes, and I still didn't see him. And he still hadn't come out the other side!

Finally I got down on my hands and knees and felt around until I encountered something warm and soft and alive, not two feet from where I had been standing.

Erik was an old, old possum, and with him the standard possum tricks had been raised to the level of an art.

A couple of weeks after he arrived, when Snoopy and Kylie were both out, I heard the screams. I raced out, and found Erik on the lowest branch of Snoopy's tree, about twenty feet up, looking extremely bewildered. I located Kylie fairly quickly in her own tree, and in no danger. Snoopy I couldn't find anywhere.

After a while, however, there was another scream, from the ground under the branch Erik was on. Snoopy was lying flat on her back, absolutely rigid. I'd never seen a possum do that before, and I was terrified. I thought her back was broken. I touched her, and she screamed again. She was incapable of knowing me from Adam.

I didn't know what to do, and looked desperately for something flat to slide under her, but there was nothing around. Then I noticed that her tail was very tightly curled round a nearby fern. I hoped that meant that there couldn't be a serious spinal injury, and decided to try to take her back to the house.

Erik, meantime, remained where he was, looking even more bewildered. The source of his bemusement was now clear enough. Females were supposed to clout him across the face with a handful of razor-sharp claws if they didn't favour his advances, and chase him away. They weren't supposed to fall out of trees and lie on their backs, screaming.

I picked Snoopy up as gently as I could. She screamed again. And gave a couple more screams as I started to carry her back to the house. Her head relaxed a little as we got closer to the house, and she stopped screaming, apparently starting to realise that she was safe, but the rest of her body remained as stiff as a board. I put her to bed, still apparently in a catatonic state, and tried to think what to do.

As usual, it was the middle of the night. I couldn't find any visible injuries, and it looked like some sort of shock reaction. If so, moving her to take her to a vet, supposing I could find one at that time of night, was likely to do her more harm than good. She seemed gradually more

aware of her surroundings, though still pretty well catatonic. I fell back on the old standby - keep her warm and comfortable in her own nest, which she knows to be a place of security, spoon feed her small quantities of milk at intervals, reassure her with my presence, my hand on her nose to let her smell me. She very, very gradually started to relax.

Meanwhile, I thought about Kylie. I didn't know what Erik had done to Snoopy, and Kylie was still only very tiny. Sure enough, after about half an hour or so, I heard the ruckus. By that time it was evident that Snoopy was alive, and not likely to die in the next couple of minutes. I raced back to Kylie's tree and saw Erik up there with her, approaching her along a branch. Little Kylie, a third his size, flew at him like fury personified. Erik duly retreated, with somewhat of an air of reassurance. This was something he understood.

I decided Kylie could take care of herself, and went back to Snoopy. Sure enough, Kylie came in about twenty minutes later, unharmed and not particularly agitated. She ate her food and put herself to bed on top of the wardrobe, with no apparent sign that anything abnormal had occurred.

Snoopy remained effectively dead, with *rigor mortis* set in, for several hours. Little by little she relaxed, and fell into a natural sleep.

Just on first light she woke up, and very stiffly climbed out of bed. She gave every appearance of being embarrassed, and trying to pretend that nothing had happened. She resumed, as well as she could, her normal activities, nibbling a little of her dinner, and trying somewhat unsuccessfully to scuttle, then went to sleep under the bed - she couldn't manage to get on it.

She was stiff and sore for a couple of days, and lucky I was there to feed her. But she then took up her normal routine, without any sign of anxiety. Poor Erik had probably done no more than press an unseasonable question. Snoopy, with her comparative inexperience and history of being beaten up by larger possums, in all likelihood over-reacted, mistaking his intentions. True to form, she fell out of the tree, and possibly increased the damage by tensing her muscles in fright.

She seemed to know herself that it was all a mistake, a fuss over nothing. I hated to think what might have happened, however. A possum that just lies on the ground screaming is an obvious meal for any passing dog. I collected Snoopy from under trees on several occasion after that, sometimes stiff, sometimes just sitting there stunned, though never such obvious dog-bait for so long. She, too, apparently learnt from experience not to take minor attacks so seriously.

Second Mating

A couple of weeks later, Snoopy came galloping in the window, in a state of great glee. Hot on her heels was Erik. Snoopy jumped down and came dancing over towards me. Erik followed her to the floor, and she turned and pointed at him with her nose, then turned to me, and then to him again, and nudged him, and coaxed him, and finally sat up and put her arm around him and pulled him towards me, and all the while she kept looking back at me with pride and delight, `Look! Look what I've found! Look what I've got! Isn't he handsome! Isn't he wonderful!'

I said, rather weakly, ` Yes, yes Snoopy, he certainly is a fine handsome possum. Hullo, Erik.'

He was indeed a very large, fine, handsome possum, but Erik and I had known each other for weeks, and he was as bewildered as I was. He, in turn, kept looking up at me for an explanation.

A couple of weeks before, he had nearly frightened the life out of her, but Snoopy, it was clear, had only just seen him.

She had proudly shown off her climbing achievements to me when she was a baby; she had proudly shown me her territory, when she acquired

it; but I had never expected this.

But while my admiration and approval was certainly what Snoopy wanted, and she showed it, she also seemed to want my active co-operation in some way, looking up at me the way she always did when she was asking for something. I couldn't think what it was, but I turned out the lights to make Erik more comfortable, and closed the window, without locking it, to discourage him from leaving. Snoopy showed her approval - that was something along the lines she meant, but it still wasn't quite it. Erik, on his part, was slightly disconcerted by having his retreat cut off, and showed signs of thinking about leaving.

I went and got Snoopy's dinner from the bedroom, and put it on the loungeroom floor. Snoopy stood beside Erik while he ate his fill, clearly trying to control her impatience. When he finally turned his attentions to her, she remained fixed in her previous intention of bringing him to me. Apparently she had settled on the idea that he should do what he came to do in my immediate proximity. She tried to lead him under the chair I was sitting on, under my legs, coaxing him, putting her arm around him, moving a few steps and presenting her rear to him, inviting him to mount.

Erik was clearly a bit dubious about the idea, and frankly so was I. A couple of scrabbling possums under my legs wasn't what I considered a good idea. I moved to a chair which was solid underneath. But Snoopy had her way in the end, and a brief coupling took place under my feet.

Erik was still none too keen on the whole affair. While neither of us was in any doubt about what Snoopy wanted, it was, by possum standards, highly irregular to say the least. Forward ladies were of a piece with ones who lay on the ground and screamed. To say nothing of houses, and humans who were somehow involved in what she wanted. He'd respond to her overtures, and mount her briefly, but his heart really wasn't in his work. He finally decided to leave: the combination of Snoopy's cajoling and my gastronomic blandishments persuaded him to change his mind.

Gradually he began to accept the situation, and his own instinct began to be roused. He started to initiate the moves, and their courtship - the gentler courtship of lovers, with snarls, to be sure, occasionally, but also with love pats and caresses - continued in slow but perpetual motion, from one end of Snoopy's house to the other, for the next few hours.

Both possums finally forgot all about me, and went their way. When Erik finally mounted her in earnest they were in her scuttling place, near the opening that gave access to under the bed. In the middle of the performance, Snoopy seemed to change her mind. And I don't entirely blame her. Male possums would put a satyr to shame. Erik was a very large possum, with masculine equipment to match. Snoopy's quiet hissing took on a note of pain and surprise. It hurt.

She retired under the bed. Erik tried to follow, but he was an old hand, and a couple of brief reminders were all he needed to make him mindful of what happens to over-enthusiastic males who follow unwilling females into their actual nests. It was, by then, in any case false dawn. He retired to the window sill, accepted some refreshments, and departed.

The next night he returned, very much more sanguine about the situation. In the interim, he'd apparently decided that life had given him a present. A female who was not only too weak to mete out hard punishment, and very, very willing, but actually affectionate in her responses; a house, i.e. a flat place, more convenient for such activities than a tree, which, nonetheless, had the same security as a tree; all the food he'd ever dreamt about - what more could any male possum want? He marched happily in the window and headed straight for the bedroom, Snoopy's dinner, and Snoopy.

She flew at him, and chased him out the window.

Snoopy was a true female possum, after all - love, at most brief, consummation, then back to the nest with an even more rabid concern for its security than before.

Erik continued to be a frequent, if erratic, visitor, both to the windows and to Snoopy's trees.

KYLIE, THE POSSUM IMPERIALIST

Kylie, in the meanwhile, was growing apace. She was a true Inglesider in that she had her father's short ears and slightly blunted features, lacking what to my taste is the prettiness of the Jenny-possums, but a good-looking possum in her own way. Between the two episodes with Erik, she, too, had created some drama of her own.

One night she didn't come back inside, but I heard a scrambling in the bedroom roof, just near the bed. I went out, and, sure enough, there was space for a possum capable of tying itself in reef knots to get between the roof and the ceiling at just that point, and Kylie was scrambling in. She was only just on the corner, nowhere near any electric wiring, so that seemed a reasonable place for her, if that was where she wanted to be. For a while it sounded as if she were panting, and I grew worried and went back to check, but she was only washing herself, settling in before going to sleep.

That seemed to solve an emerging problem. Relations between Kylie and Snoopy had been growing progressively worse, with more frequent squabbles, and with Snoopy driving her away - for a short distance at least - more and more often. Kylie, however, was beginning to stand up for herself, and it was evident that the tables were in danger of being turned.

That simply couldn't be. Kylie was a perfectly fit, perfectly normal possum, and as capable as any of them of looking after herself without assistance. But she was such a sweet-natured, affectionate little girl that it seemed a shame that she couldn't have a tame human of her own - lots of people, in fact, would have been delighted if she were to take up residence near them and come visiting.

But it's easier to conceive of such a plan than to put it into practice. The problem would be to persuade Kylie that it was a good idea - which could only be done if the timing were precisely right, and I could pick a moment when Snoopy was really making things too hot for her, and she would be only too delighted to accept refuge somewhere else. That moment didn't arrive.

She'd been down to Newport with me and Snoopy a couple of times, but she clearly didn't like it. The motorbike scared her, and sent her back to cuddling up to Mummy in the bag - Snoopy, of course, never rejected Kylie, whatever her age, if she approached her in baby fashion, confining her hostility to moments when Kylie behaved like Another Possum. The first couple of nights at Newport Kylie panicked at the slightest provocation, and jumped on Snoopy's back. By this time she weighed more than half as much as Snoopy, but her mother, sagging under the burden, loyally carried her to safety under the nearest wardrobe or what-have-you.

I took Kylie outside to see how she'd go, and tried introducing her to the box in Snoopy's old tree, without much success. She played round in the tree for a while, and Foxy's contemporary daughter, Honeybunch, came and played in the same tree; this time the Foxy-line didn't shine by comparison, the honours were about equal. Kylie was as prepared to ignore Honey as Honey was to ignore Kylie.

But the sight of all the other possums, *en masse*, terrified her. Till now the only other possums in her world had been Snoopy and Erik, with others heard occasionally in the distance. She took off into the bush, and that was when the incident with Joe occurred.

In my room she was more self-confident, after the first night, since she promptly rediscovered Joey's old route up the door jambs and made herself at home on top of the wardrobe. But there wasn't really anything for Kylie to do, inside. Snoopy had a purpose and significance for every inch, and could keep herself occupied for hours, but Kylie, after a cursory inspection, found little to engage her attention.

She really didn't fit in at Newport.

If she were going to live in the roof at Ingleside, however, that seemed a reasonable solution. I took her dinner out to her just before dark the next night, putting it on top of the second tank, which was near where she was.

She came out and at first seemed delighted to see me, and climbed down my arm on to my shoulder, then suddenly set about biting through the back of my neck, with every appearance of dedicated hatred. I was fortunate that I was wearing a leather jacket at the time as, perched as I was on the tank stand, matters could have been very serious otherwise.

I dumped her back on to the roof as fast as I could and beat a retreat. I decided that it was my fault - I should know by now not to approach a possum in its own nest, particularly one in the first flush of pride of ownership.

The break was not complete. Kylie still occasionally slept on the wardrobe inside, though more often she simply came into the house of her human dinner and to play there, particularly when Snoopy was out. Snoopy for the most part ignored her, but sometimes put her out. I felt sorry for poor little Kylie, and let her sneak in, distracting Snoopy's attention on occasions. Kylie remained as loving and gentle with me as ever, except for that one isolated incident.

Then one night I was playing with her, or thought I was, when she was on one of the bookshelves in the study. She was sitting up boxing with me, with slow, ritualized movements, and I, wanting her to speed to get some practice for the real fights she was going to encounter, started touching her quickly, here and there all over her body.

At first she took it as part of the game, then she grew perplexed and reproachful, then, without any formal warning, leapt at my face, mouth open, pure rage and hatred.

I was too astonished to do more than lean backwards, but fortunately that was enough to make her leap fall short. Whereupon she got back up on the bookcase, glared at me, then reverted to normal.

That incident was undoubtedly my fault - I'd thought I was playing, when in fact I was teasing. It was I who turned the ritualized contest into a serious one by breaking the rules. I'd made the odd mistake of that sort with Snoopy, though all I got from her was a reproachful look, and it hadn't affected our general relationship. So I decided to just make sure I didn't provoke Kylie again.

Unfortunately, no more provocation was needed. Kylie still came in and behaved herself like an angel, but more and more frequently she'd start to come to me in her old affectionate way, then, when she got within range, suddenly fly at me, gripping with a bulldog grip, letting go only when a mouthful of me came away.

Snoopy had also gone through a biting phase, but her worst bite amounted to a slight graze. Kylie was something else entirely. At that stage there didn't seem to be any guile involved. Her initial intentions were genuinely mild - it was only when she got within critical distance of me that a compulsive reflex took over.

Knowing this, I continued to tolerate her presence, hoping that she'd grow out of it as Snoopy had done. Snoopy, for a possum, was as bad

as I was.

Snoopy's tolerance of Kylie as a juvenile

It became clear that what Kylie did to me was nothing compared to what she wanted to do to Snoopy. She'd already had the best of several fights outside, which resulted in Snoopy retreating inside, with or without my aid, and Kylie being shut out. But Kylie was still not fully grown, and afraid of Snoopy inside the house. On one occasion she'd come into the lounge, a proud young adult, then caught sight of Snoopy in the bedroom, and literally shrunk to half her size in front of my eyes, like a foolish pup being sung by an adult dog, making herself as inconspicuous and as much like an innocuous baby as possible.

On another occasion Snoopy was sitting just outside the front door, on the veranda - ambiguous territory - with Kylie perched in the springing position on a stool, just behind and above her. Kylie was hissing and swearing, poised to leap on to Snoopy's back, but Snoopy gave the most remarkable exhibition of Not Seeing I've ever witnessed.

There was fear, as well as anger, in Kylie's swearing, and Snoopy, although under those circumstances she would have had the advantage of being the territory holder once the brawl began, simply had no intention of attacking her daughter.

I was extremely worried, as I knew what Kylie had nearly done to my neck, and somewhat desperate, as I knew that the wrong sudden move on my part was likely to precipitate exactly what I was trying to avoid. I tried to draw Snoopy's attention to Kylie, who was about a foot above her, behind her, yelling her head off. But Snoopy Did Not See that possum. In sheer desperation I finally turned Snoop's head towards Kylie, but she just firmly turned it back again. She still Did Not See that possum.

Kylie was still in two minds whether to attack or not, and anything that looked like flight on Snoopy's part was apt to decide her in favour of the former. But so was a prolonged period of threatening, without check. I gradually eased Snoopy towards the door, then finally got her inside and slammed it as Kylie sprang.

On yet another occasion, when Kylie was vacillating between wardrobe and roof, she suddenly started having seizures. In the lounge, where she'd been playing, I found a very groggy spider bearing a suspicious resemblance to a funnel-web, which I promptly Returned to Nature on the other side of the nearest running water. As always, it was the middle of the night, and I hadn't the faintest idea what to do.

Most human medicines, including aspirin, are more likely to harm a possum than whatever is wrong with it. So I put Kylie in the bed, and resorted to the old warm milk trick - it was obviously a case of poison, but I didn't even know for sure that the spider had anything to do with it.

That didn't seem to be working, but Snoopy, who at first resented the intruder in her bed, then started to take a solicitous interest in Kylie's plight. She reverted to her old maternal ways, and cleaned Kylie's bowels out. Whether that had any effect or not I don't know, but Kylie's seizures gradually abated, and by morning she was wobbly, but obviously going to survive. Snoopy, however, was off-colour the next night.

The situation with Kylie, however, went from bad to worse. It became more and more apparent that she now came into the house in the evening not to ask for food, but to attack, me or Snoopy, whoever she could catch.

It became only too clear what was going on. Kylie owned the roof - she'd found two additional places where she could get in, and very early in the piece pioneered an alternative route across the roof, jumping on to it from the nearest Xmas bush. I still put her dinner out on the tank nearest where she was currently sleeping, or hand-fed her in the day when

she was sleepy and docile, rather than give her added motivation for coming inside, so her prerogatives were not significantly diminished.

She also effectively owned all the bush along the creek - she was in the process of establishing other nests in trees at the southern boundary of Snoopy's territory, just upstream from it (as we were later made painfully aware), and there were no more possums downstream until you get to a group right on Cicada Glen Road. Occasionally some came as far as the property next to us to the north for a hand-out there, while Erik, and later the others from upstream, particularly Bindi and Snug, followed the same route across the property, sometimes, I suspect, for the same purpose. But there was no serious competition for Kylie for nearly a quarter of a mile of creek-bank, complete with all the vegetation, valley and slope, a possum likes to have. Any suburbanite possum in its right mind would have given its tail for such a territory.

But Kylie, unfortunately, knew there was something better still, Snoopy's house, and she intended to have that too. Which, in fact, was quite reasonable from her point of view.

Snoopy was still gradually growing, and getting stronger - she could now jump about eighteen inches in a tree, which would have been enough to extract her from her awkward situation back in the days when Sextus first courted her - but Kylie had outstripped her. Not only was she stronger and more ferocious than Snoopy, she was also larger and heavier. As the strongest female possum in the vicinity she was `entitled' to have the best nest.

Which was all very well, but Snoopy didn't have anywhere else to go. I was sorry to interfere with Kylie's natural prerogatives, but if I hadn't interfered in the first place Snoopy would have died when she was three days old, and Kylie would never have been born.

Kylie set about achieving her desires in orthodox possum fashion. She tried to drive Snoopy out.

When I wouldn't let her do this, she gradually worked out that I was the real enemy, and turned her attention to me. To what extent she rationalized the situation in possum terms I don't know, but her actions, reflex and voluntary, soon made it clear that she regarded me in some sense as a female possum.

My clothes smelt of Snoopy, she had seen me looking after Snoopy, and after herself at times, when she was a baby, so apparently she decided that I was in some sense Snoopy's mother, and so the senior female and the main target.

There simply wasn't anything in her experience to tell her otherwise. Snoopy had seen a lot of humans and a lot of possums, and knew the difference: female possums were prone to bite and chase her, and males made a nuisance of themselves on the 355 days a year she didn't want them; humans were to be preferred. Kylie hadn't seen enough of either species to be sure there was a meaningful difference.

And right now there wasn't. I was frustrating her desires just as much as any female possum would. She simply reacted as any possum would in the situation as she supposed it to be, though with excessive savagery.

Her savagery really was excessive. She seldom warned or threatened before she attacked - there was no way of telling her intentions until too late. I just had to presume that she had murder in her heart whenever I saw her coming, and remove myself promptly. Her actual bites were quite inordinate. I have, through my own stupidity, been bitten, sometimes quite badly and in anger, by other possums. But Kylie was in a class all her own.

She'd latch on to me wherever she could, and bite with a bull-

dog grip, but at the same time working her mouth to take in more and more, and go deeper and deeper. If I managed to throw her off, at the loss of clothing, skin and flesh, then she'd grab hold somewhere else before I could escape. On one occasion she took a piece about a quarter of an inch in diameter out of my hand, through a motorcycle glove.

She actually seemed to enjoy biting me, and I think it's possible, given that some possums like meat occasionally, that she literally got a taste for blood - mine. It didn't help that her bites often turned septic. This is always a risk with marsupial bites, since some of the things they eat, which leave traces on their teeth, are poisonous to humans - in Kylie's case I suspect lantana. At any rate, if I didn't manage to get antibiotics or something fairly hefty on her bite within a few minutes, I was likely to end up with a weeping sore, the discharge from which infected the surrounding pores, so that I was apt to have my whole arm in a mess for a week. And it didn't help that she deftly chose the weeks when I literally couldn't afford to go to the doctor, at that time always a luxury for people on scholarships.

By the time Kylie was actually planning ambushes for me, it wanted but little imagination to see Madam Dracula assiduously dipping her fangs in snake venom before she set out for her nightly raid.

Snoopy still went out, but about one time in three I had to intervene to save her bacon. As a result, she and I began to adopt the same attitude to Kylie: we just stayed out of her way, and stayed inside with the window shut, whenever we knew she was prowling around.

Outside, Snoopy avoided her as much as possible, as I did, and I got into the habit of putting on full motorcycle gear, leather jacket, gloves, long boots and helmet with face-plate, whenever I went out after Snoopy, except for emergencies when there were squawks. The helmet made life difficult, because you can't hear much except your own heartbeat in one of those. But Kylie's preferred target was my face or throat, so I had to make sure she didn't reach it.

And whenever we saw Kylie coming, we simply beat a hasty retreat to safety. The only trouble was, we didn't always see her.

These tactics, of course, only made Kylie more frustrated and determined. Some nights she went round and round the house, trying to find a way in, if not the window, one of the doors, or the spare room (which wasn't possum proof - as long as it was partially unroofed, which happened every time there was a storm, she had an ideal nest, preferred when she had babies, in the ceiling).

I shut everything I could think of - she always managed to find another way in. Snoopy was far more sanguine than I about the security provided by the house: I remember one night lying in bed, trembling at the thought that Kylie might find a way down the chimney in the study while I was asleep; Snoopy was sitting happily on the end of the bed, grooming contentedly.

Gradually, however, I learnt to anticipate her, and made at least the main part of the house Kylie-proof. Whereupon she started lying in ambush for me.

At first she'd hide outside the doors, and dart in as soon as I opened one a few inches. Experience soon taught me to get the measure of that, and at night I used only doors where I could inspect the vicinity from an adjacent window first. I still had to go out sometimes, however - the plumbing was somewhat primitive, and the dinkum dunny a few yards from the house. Kylie simply waited in ambush - under the house, on two occasions - until I made my tentative appearance. The first I'd know about it was Kylie firmly attached to my leg.

I was very much at a disadvantage in altercations with Kylie. I could outrun her over a long distance, and retreat into cleared ground where I knew she wouldn't follow. But, like all possums, she was lightning-fast over the first few feet, and the only ground clear enough nearby was above the house, towards Lane Cove Road. When I did succeed in reaching it, that left a situation with Kylie pacing back and forth along the veranda, charging at me whenever I tried to return to the house, and Snoopy either inside or, more often, out god-knows-where. The only advantage I could see in that situation was that even if Snoopy was god-knows-where, at least she wasn't being molested by Kylie. Kylie, in fact, seemed to have decided that I got priority - Snoopy she could deal with at her leisure once she'd got rid of me.

My superior size and strength gave me no help whatsoever, once she battened on to me, since there was no way in which I could use it effectively. I could, of course, have killed her - possum anatomy comprises an almost impervious whole with a couple of extremely vulnerable points. But there wasn't anything I could do short of killing her that made any impression.

Whacking her as hard as I dared had no effect, any more than yelling at her, except to spur her on to greater efforts. I tried choking her to make her let go, but she didn't let go until she was unconscious, and I was always afraid I'd gone too far and killed her. Kylie was a nuisance. To put it bluntly, she was a bloody nuisance. But so far as I'm concerned there is no death penalty for just being a bloody nuisance.

She was indeed capable of murdering Snoopy - a Kylie mouthful out of my person was a minor injury, but out of Snoopy it was something else again. But by now she'd transferred most of her attention to me, and, knowing the trees they both frequented, I could get there in time to prevent more than minor damage. Snoopy, very wisely, either fell or jumped out of the tree, then retreated into the bushes if she weren't stunned. So, although any minor scuffle meant a serious fight for Snoopy, she didn't, in fact, get more than a couple of bad hidings, which any possum has to expect in the same time span.

The aim of the fights between suburbanite possums is not, in any case, to kill, but to drive away. So Snoopy just stayed out of Kylie's reach, inside the house, or, on her now rarer expeditions, outside.

I considered as an alternative catching Kylie and taking her somewhere a long, long way away. Once I even got as far as trapping her when she made a raid into the kitchen one night, by closing off that section of the house, and, armoured, transferring her into a box the next day. But in the end I let her go with a caution, sticking her outside under a tree before it was properly dark. By that time I'd seen too much of what happens to dumped possums on Mona Vale Road. Not even Kylie merited that.

In any case, from the point of view of merit, Kylie was doing nothing wrong. The problem was malimprintation - she thought I was some sort of possum. Her attitude to Snoopy was perfectly correct. Insofar as I could observe, while she was very severe on any other possums, her attacks were nevertheless within the bounds of the norm. They lacked the dedicated hatred, the personal touch, which she directed towards Snoopy and me. We were the only ones with whom she was actually murderous. I must admit that I observed Kylie as little as possible, but, in any case, there were no casualties that could be sheeted home to her. She seemed afraid of other humans - chance visitors would relieve the siege.

Kylie was a far more normal possum than Snoopy, and, though I was determined that she wasn't going to kill Snoopy or drive her away, I didn't feel justified in interfering with her. Her one abnormality was her

attacks on me - in this she was as much of an exception as Snoopy was, on the other end of the scale, and, like Snoopy, could not have been the way she was except for her extraordinary upbringing.

Moreover, Snoopy was a wonderful ambassadress for her species. I didn't think Kylie would be likely to attack anyone but me, but I wasn't sure, and I wasn't ready to release a man-eating possum on the world.

She was mostly my fault, and partially Snoopy's, because of her tolerance, and we, therefore, were the only ones who should take the risks and cope with the problem.

I considered retreat as a solution: take Snoopy and go somewhere else. If Kylie wanted the place so much she could have it - she wouldn't find it nearly so desirable once her dinner stopped appearing on the tank. I made vague enquiries, but, oddly enough, it proved impossible to find another place where I could keep a possum. And Kylie was at least the devil we knew.

Necessity is the mother of invention, so partial and temporary solutions did appear. Like all such solutions, they never entirely worked more than once.

The first occurred to me one night when Kylie ambushed me from the bushes near the creek. As always, she was firmly attached to me before I knew she was there. There was nowhere for me to retreat to, since she, being smaller, was much faster through the bush than I. I'd heard a brawl somewhere in the vicinity, and Snoopy was out, so I was desperate to get rid of her. I pitched her into the bushes, mouthful and all, but she fastened on again before I'd gone more than a few steps.

I'd read somewhere that most animals dog-paddle naturally, and hoped it applied to possums - their coat would weigh them down if it were a matter of more than four or five feet, but there seemed no reason why they couldn't stay afloat for that far. So I said, rather grimly, `Can you swim, Kylie?' and pitched her into the creek two or three feet from the bank.

That stopped her, all right. She started to dog-paddle very slowly towards the bank, and I waited beside it to make sure she didn't get into difficulties.

I waited too long - she hauled herself out, then flew at me, and we were back where we started. This time I threw her a little further, and waited at a safer distance until she regained the bank, running as soon as she was safe. And this time I had too much start for her to catch me.

Snoopy, of course, turned up unscathed an hour or so later. Even Kylie couldn't be in two places at once.

The second partial solution presented itself when Kylie trapped me in the cats' room one night. She was in the process of dislocating one of my fingers, and it hurt like hell. I clouted her, screamed at her, and screamed just from pain. Nothing would make her release her grip even a fraction, and the position she'd twisted my finger into made it impossible for me to move without making matters worse. Meanwhile, she was assiduously twisting it further.

For what reason I don't know, I suddenly thought of yelling at her in her own language, and produced my best possum roar.

It wasn't a very good imitation, but it was good enough to take Kylie aback momentarily. While she treated me as a female possum, part of her also knew that I wasn't one, that I wasn't dangerous, and, as possums count such things, I had never in her life hurt her.

If, in truth, I was a female possum, and so likely to treat her as she was treating me, that was something else again. A female possum my size was something even Kylie would hesitate to tangle with.

While she was disconcerted, I had time to loosen her grip to one

not quite so painful, get a hold on her, and march her off to the nearest water.

The third partial solution only presented itself after an event I'm going to relate a little later. Kylie, on one occasion, had me baled up outside the house, when she was suddenly confronted by Snoopy at the door. It must have looked as if we were both likely to tackle her at once.

Suburbanite possums don't in fact gang up on each other: their psychology is the opposite of that of flock animals such as birds, and a fight between two individuals is deemed to be their private business unless their scrabbling brings them within critical distance of a third. Kylie either didn't know that, or thought that I was capable of any breach of the rules.

She was right, too - I'm no possum, and I wasn't going to scruple about etiquette where Kylie was concerned, though I wasn't going to let Snoopy get hurt, either. But the look of the situation was enough. She retreated, still threatening, and Snoopy and I both regained the house.

She was quite prepared to attack us when Snoopy was on my shoulder, however, when we constituted, as it were, one unit. My normal practice under those circumstances was to toss Snoopy to temporary safety in the nearest bush, if I could - sometimes she clung on in terror - and then deal with Kylie, or at least keep her occupied until such time as Snoopy could escape. The next time this occurred, and I got into difficulties, I called Snoopy to help me.

Snoopy was horrified and astonished. Not only did it break all the possum rules, it violated the private arrangement between us, turning the world upside down. At that stage she still loved me as her mother, and also as an integral part of her territory and nest - my presence was required in the bed before she could go to sleep, and she chest-marked my legs regularly - `You're mine' - just as she regularly chest-marked her own furniture. As such my role was that of protector, not protected - I represented security to her, not vice versa.

But I was also her non-possum friend, and territory, even mobile territory, has to be defended. Above all, I'd called her, I'd asked her to do something, and no matter what I asked, Snoopy always tried. She herself was recovering from an injury to her foot, and in mortal fear of Kylie, but she took a couple of tentative steps down towards us.

I doubt whether she would have been silly enough to actually get into the fight, but the gesture was enough. Kylie thought she was coming, and backed off long enough for Snoopy and I to escape back to the house.

I never used that method again, however. Saving myself a few scratches wasn't worth putting Snoopy through a decision like that.

Gradually, the combination of deterrents began to work on Kylie. Having learnt the lesson from the incident in the cats' room, I decided that if Kylie was going to treat me as Another Possum, I was jolly well going to behave like one.

So, whenever I laid eyes on her, except in the roof during the daytime, I'd assume the nearest I could manage to a possum threatening position, and make short charges at her - not too close or I was liable to provoke her anyway. Considering the difference in anatomy, she very quickly learnt to interpret my gestures. I never, in fact, managed to back her down, but I did, on occasions, manage to achieve a stand-off, gradually edging away until I could make a break for cleared ground or the house. And whenever she made physical contact with me, regardless of whether her teeth were in me or in my clothes, I just took a firm hold on her and marched her straight to the nearest water.

Kylie didn't like being chased, and she didn't like being

dunked. Moreover, her actions weren't achieving their purpose: Snoopy and I weren't going away.

More importantly, however, she was, of course, pregnant, and as the pregnancy progressed she became less and less willing to involve herself in strife: as the baby grew, it started to impede her movements, and also ceased to be simply a novel appurtenance in her pouch and became The Baby, to be protected. I, of course, became more loathe to throw her into the creek, although she could still close her pouch tightly enough to keep it waterproof. But ducking her head in the rainwater barrel was nearly as effective.

She still attacked Snoopy and me if she ran into us, but she no longer came looking for us simply for the purpose of biting me. She spent more nights away from the house, and we began to see less and less of her.

Kylie obviously wasn't happy with this sort of rejection treatment - there were times when she fairly clearly seemed to want more friendly contact with me. I was very sorry for her, but there was simply nothing I could to. Getting too close to her triggered off her biting reflex in spite of her previous intentions

Like Snoopy before her - but how different from Snoopy! - she started to be two possums at once.[23] She would bite, automatically, and fasten on with her bulldog grip. Then her whole body would go limp, and her ears would go down, the picture of misery, as we marched off to the nearest water source - but all the while her teeth retained their bulldog grip on me. She, too, seemed to begin to realise that it was better if we all avoided trouble by avoiding each other.

CATS

About this time, a further complication had arrived on the scene. An adolescent female black-and-white cat took up residence. She was a beautiful cat, an absolute charmer, and obviously and ex-pet. We tried advertising, to no avail. It looked very much like a classic case of a cute, pampered kitten that starts to show signs of growing into a female cat. The landlady's children were very keen to keep her, but had nowhere to put her. It seemed a reasonable solution that she should stay in the hitherto unused additional room. The children named her Sox.

I now had a problem with rats, so this seemed a good solution for me, too. Where possums can go, so can bush rats, and they usually do. Some were forever getting into the house and stealing Snoopy's dinner. Being a browsing animal, she ate only a little at a time, and no sooner was her back turned than the rest would disappear.

Possums, in a place of security, usually eat their food where they are. Rats, however, remove it in it its entirety to their nests. They don't simply take what they need to eat, they hoard as much as they can get, not, in fact, ever eating all of it.

There isn't too much you can do about rats if you have a possum - poison or traps are likely to catch the wrong thing. It doesn't help that bush rats themselves, whatever their ultimate origin, don't resemble the European town rats very much at all. Sanitary habits aside, they're clean, sleek, pert little creatures who insist on appearing boldly in front of you, on the assumption that they're your pets. I'm only too delighted to leave them be in the bush, and frankly don't give a hang if they feed on food scraps that are thrown away anyway. Even rats in the roof, as long as they stay there and don't chew the wiring or do other damage, doesn't seem to me the end of the world. But unfortunately they lack the tact to do so. Rats in the house, building nests in disused corners, have to go.

Furthermore, they were making things even more difficult outside. If I put Kylie's dinner on the tank too early, they would remove the lot before she got it, and she would come and make an assault on the

window, on the grounds that I hadn't given her her due. If I took it out too late, I was likely to encounter Kylie awake, and, at the least, this would mean my being baled up and forced to put the food down where I was and flee - Kylie no longer asked for food, she just baled me up, reared up and threatened, and extorted it - a situation satisfactory to neither party, since it meant that the food was placed in the open, on the ground.

All in all, I thought a cat that just happened to live down the other end of the house seemed an excellent idea. I hoped she'd discourage the rats, rather than actually kill the things, but, in any case, it seemed the only practical solution.

Which is all very well in theory, but unfortunately takes no account of the individual personality of the cat concerned.

Another cat - say the second female, Patch, who showed up subsequently, or one of Sox' offspring, the tom Smiley, who was still with me when I drafted this, would have been quite happy to fall in with such a plan. But not Sox.

She had firm ideas about her place in life - not a farm cat, forsooth, but the sole and pampered pet of an adoring owner, and she set about campaigning to achieve her end.

I endeavoured to be firm, but physical circumstances made it difficult. If the window was open for Snoopy to go in and out at night, Sox simply planted herself on the sill - which not surprisingly thoroughly disconcerted Snoopy when she tried to come in. Snoopy, being a possum, couldn't help but be jealous and possessive as far as I was concerned: any relationship between us had to be exclusive to exist. She put up with Sox, because I asked her to, as long as Sox remained in her own end of the house at night, but Sox had no intention of so doing.

Punishment or castigation was futile. I'd chase her away from the window, and she'd be back as soon as I turned away. I'd catch her and smack her, or duck her in the rain-barrel, and ten minutes later she'd be back. I'd shut her in her room at night, and the next night she'd be up to her old tricks.

I gave her plenty of attention in the daytime, but that didn't seem to be enough. Either the message didn't get through, or, when she wanted attention, even unfavourable attention was better than none.

And it took only a couple of episodes at the window to teach her to be uncatchable in those circumstances: she'd take off as soon as I moved towards her, then reappear, and announce her presence, as soon as I resumed my seat. There was nothing she liked better than a game of chasings. Checkmate.

She had another overriding passion, too. She loved to hunt, catch things, and then torture them to death. The process took up to two hours, unless I intervened, and when it was dead she would cry pitifully, as for a lost kitten, because her toy wouldn't play with her any more. Sox soon achieved Kylie's status as a chronic nuisance.

Not long after Sox made her appearance, an old tortoiseshell-and-white female also started hanging around. She was a far more obvious stray than Sox, and removed herself for the remainder of the night if berated. She also made an unintentional nuisance of herself, ratting on top of the tank near Kylie's dinner. Kylie, and the rats too, soon decided to stay away as long as she was there, so she ate the dinner herself instead.

I discouraged her all I could. Sox was more than enough. But she complicated the issue by making it evident that she was old, and not too well, and in imminent danger of having about eight kittens - there were five survivors - and then did so, in a nearby stormwater creek, just as the rain was starting and a flash flood beginning. I moved the lot into a box in the

cats' room.

Patch was in fact the best-natured and least troublesome of cats, except for her propensity for producing large numbers of kittens, frequently. They were beautiful kittens - the first litter included tortoiseshell-and-white, black-and-white part Persian looking, and a black-and-white identical to Sox, who, from her attitude to Patch, could have been a previous daughter. The second litter was the same again, with a couple of grey tiger-striped kittens and a ginger tom for good measure.

I managed to persuade a long-suffering pet-shop owner to display the first litter, and they found homes, but things were getting out of hand: I paid out for an unsuccessful attempt to save one of the kittens who died of a tick at about six weeks old, and wormed, house-trained and flea-proofed the rest, but I simply couldn't afford things like inoculations for the whole tribe. And Patch was a cat-factory.

Naturally, the presence of two female cats attracted the toms: a black midnight type, and a huge old tiger-striped one. In the meantime, Sox went out for a couple of nights and had herself a ball, then, in due course, came round the house one day mewing urgently in a manner that sounded very like, `Let me in, let me in, I'm having kittens.'

She didn't look to me as if she ought to be doing that yet, but I let her into the kitchen, and she promptly made good her claim in the nearest cardboard carton: a large baldy-faced black-and white tom, a second, smaller black-and-white tom the image of his mother, one still-born kitten, and a tiny, very weak pure black female. It was less than a month later that Patch produced her second contribution.

Sox was jealous of all the kittens, including her own: her aim in life was to be the kitten herself. That and plenty of things to torture to death was all she wanted. She swore, and tried to molest Patch's kittens whenever she went near them, and neglected her own: the little black female runt nearly died, and additional food was necessary long before they should have been weaned.

Fortunately Patch was the opposite. Her world revolved around kittens, and, while she couldn't feed them, she accepted Sox' three as part of her own family for all other purposes. Her most frequent consort, the striped tom, who wasn't in fact the father of either current litter (though he sired Patch's second lot), nevertheless thought he was, and had some of the wild feline attitude towards his supposed cubs, deigning to bestow a lick of greeting on them when he arrived, condescending on occasion to flick his tail for them to play with.

So the `grandparents' took over much of the functions of the delinquent Sox, who fed her kittens in a desultory way for the first couple of weeks, then interested herself only in the middle-sized tom. She considered him fun to play with, when she was in the mood; on one occasion she started to forget it was a play-fight, and I had to rescue her favourite son from her. Fortunately he was bespoken early in the piece, and I sped him to his new home as soon as he was weaned.

At the earliest opportunity, as soon as I could afford it, I gave Sox one of her wishes - she was never again to be burdened with detested kittens. But Patch was another case entirely - she was an old cat, and they were her whole world. There didn't seem to be much I could do about her.

Sox's remaining kittens didn't find homes. The baldy-faced tom, a wonderfully good-natured, cheery little chap who was very much a boy from the time he could toddle, to the annoyance of his little sister, threw a spoke in the wheel by nearly dying of a tick when he was a few weeks old. He earned his name, Smiley, and probably his ultimate fate, by trying to

purr and play with the telephone cord while I was trying to ring the vet at 1 a.m. It was touch and go with him, and during his convalescence he and his sister outgrew the cute baby stage which was their main hope of finding a home.

Snoopy, of course, thoroughly disapproved of all the cats, and I didn't particularly want them myself. But only Sox was a real nuisance as far as Snoopy was concerned, as she was the only one who tried to horn in on her prerogatives. Kylie, with the public appearance of her first baby fast approaching, was very much milder: at first she'd caused uproar by invading the cats' room, with an eye to the kittens, but it had taken only a couple of such incidents to establish the principle of every-man-for-himself when she showed up.

Things in fact seemed to have settled down, and Snoopy was going in and out again relatively unimpeded.

To my disappointment, there had been no issue from the mating with Erik, though Kylie fell pregnant at about the time he was making his presence felt. There had been a small patch of blood on the bedclothes at about the appropriate time, but nothing further.

3. Lost Possum - Found Possum.

One night towards the end of summer, Snoopy decided she very much wanted to go out. She couldn't even wait until it was properly dark.

I read the signs, she was on heat again, but there seemed no reason to keep her in.

Nothing unusual occurred - there may or may not have been a single snarl down in her tree at about 7 o'clock, but there was nothing particularly alarming about that. The only thing was, Snoopy didn't come back.

By midnight I started to get worried, and began searching for he. I went up the creek as far as its source, with no success, and all over the next property to the south, through the cars abandoned up the back in the scrub along Lane Cove Road, calling all the way. I was, as always when it seemed as if Snoopy had got out of her own area, plagued by the peculiar acoustics.

Crazy as it may sound to someone who hasn't lived in a hill-and-valley situation, the acoustics are strictly topical, and relate to the immediate topography rather than distance: from one end of the house, voices in the place next door to the north sounded as if they were outside the window; from the other, Mona Vale Road, about a quarter of a mile away to the south, sounded as if it was ten yards distant, and nothing could be heard at all from the other direction; dogs down on Cicada Glen Road, when they were facing the house, sounded as if they were next door, then, as they turned, as if they were going away - the dogs in question were in fact chained, and stationary, at night; from a high point near the back of the property, sounds from the houses on the ridge between Ingleside and Terrey Hills came across quite clearly, but nothing could be heard from the little valley through which the creek runs, much closer; and so on., You simply have to learn each bit by heart.

I already knew about fluky acoustics before I came, since the situation at Newport is similar, and I had also had occasion in my professional life to know something about resonating frequencies, and the way small caves and depressions were utilised in ancient Greek theatres to

amplify sound. I was now practiced enough at Ingleside to be able to hear possums who didn't particularly wish to conceal their movements in Snoopy's territory and a little beyond, and know where the sound was really coming from, but to detect anything further, I myself had to move, to places where I didn't know how to compensate for the local acoustic topography. And I couldn't use a proper search pattern, for fear of leading Snoopy further from the house: I had to keep my calling and signalling leading home. Not knowing whether she was injured, or what, I didn't know how long to wait for her in any one place. I could have covered every inch of the area given time, but time was what I didn't have. She'd got to Mona Vale Road in a night before, so I had to make some attempt to cover at least the area in between in the first night. Which meant, as always, I had to rely on her either coming to me, or drawing my attention to herself.

By dawn, there was still no sign of her, so I got my bike and started going round the roads. I couldn't check more than a few feet from the sides, because the area was too great, but knew that animals hit on the roads aren't always killed outright, any more than people. Often it's shock or exposure that kills them afterwards, but with possums, even supposing someone stopped to check, it might not be apparent that they are still alive - possums can seem very, very dead without being so. Immediate veterinary attention might save them.

The next day I went over the ground again. The scrub was simply too dense to search every inch - if I'd known for certain that she was within, say, a particular acre, I might have been able to do so, but with the area which now must be covered, given the possibility of a night's travel, all I could do was search her own territory as thoroughly as possible, and in the rest, check only the obvious places for an injured possum - on the ground under large trees, in all the crevices and under all the ledges of the ridge which starts to emerge alongside the creek, becoming sizeable cliffs by the time it gets down into Ku-ring-gai Chase, in hollow logs, and in all the clumps of really dense vegetation I could manage. I got permission from the people next door downstream, and searched their place too - she'd never gone that way before, but other possums did, so, in the mating season, so it was possible that she could have followed.

I searched the dumped cars again, as a possible daytime refuge for an injured possum on the move, and got a pair of binoculars and searched the tree branches as best I could. There were any number of holes which could be used by possums - unfortunately, since the prime prerequisite of a possum nest is security, those chosen are usually too deep for the bottom to be seen, and there is no way of telling whether a possum is actually in a particular tree on a particular day. Scratch marks on the trunk are only a guide. They can remain fresh for some time - they only mean that there was a possum climbing that tree some time recently. Conversely, the absence of scratch marks doesn't mean that there isn't a possum. I have often seen possums, including Snoopy, go up trees without making a sound or leaving a mark, particularly a known tree or one marked by other possums, where there is an established route from foothold to foothold, and the claws are virtually unnecessary.

At the same time I started ringing round all the local vets, the R.S.P.C.A, the Zoo, National Parks and Wildlife, the local Pound, and anywhere else I could think of where someone might have taken an injured possum. And I started going house to house round the block, in the hope that she might have the sense to turn herself in somewhere, if she were lost or injured, and couldn't get home.

That night I went back to scouring the bush, calling her. I was terrified of Mona Vale Road, but didn't know what to do about it - I wanted

to cut her off from trying to cross it, but I didn't want to lure her towards it . I couldn't risk calling her close to the road, in case she was on the other side and ran to me automatically without looking. In the end I just hovered around until the peak hour rush passed - at that time the traffic actually did stop for longish periods once the rush hour was over. And then worked my way back down the creek to the house, and started again from there, investigating every possum I could locate, on both sides of Chiltern Road. At dawn I started going round the roads again, and in the daytime asked at more houses, and checked and re-checked more of the bush and possible hiding places.

People told me that she'd just gone wild, or gone off to live with a boyfriend. I was too dubious about that to rely on it. In the first place, possums don't go and set up house in a state of connubial bliss. They mate, and then each returns to its own nest, if it can.

In the second place, I was beginning to realise that words like `wild' and `tame' have no real meaning when applied to suburbanite possums: they are human concepts which just don't correspond to anything in their psychological make-up. What suburbanite possums do is grow up, declare independence and leave home - for life as a wanderer in the case of a male, or to set up a permanent home in the case of a female. It was possible that this was a delayed declaration of independence on Snoopy's part, but, while I still wasn't entirely clear on the female departure pattern, I was pretty sure that what with moving, and the biting phase, and the establishment of a territory, and above all with the birth of Kylie, we'd done that bit already. It was so much more likely that she was lying dead or injured, or lost, that there was no future in not trying to find her.

The third day passed without any trace of her. My mother at this stage had come and helped me search the nearby rock ledges, with no success. All I found was something that looked like blood from a foot-wound not far from her tree. I tried to test it - gum resin is indistinguishable from dried blood by sight, and this didn't dissolve in water, but the thought of her grounded by a foot injury didn't help my peace of mind at all.

I hadn't ruled out the possibility that she might stay away while she was courting and show up a couple of nights later - even Jenny occasionally absented herself for a few days in the mating season, although Snoopy had never been away more than a night without something being amiss. But the third night brought no sign of her, and Kylie, who until then had showed up at the house in her usual self-confident manner, suddenly changed completely. Something clearly upset her very much. She was frightened, frightened of me, and, in particular, of the house.

I thought this must mean that she knew Snoopy was dead. I've seen the same thing twice since, and now know it was only an Empty Nest reaction. Males come and go, and their departures are expected, accepted, and cause no alarm. But Kylie knew that an established female lived in that house. For the first couple of nights her absence was accepted as just coincidence - she was away at the time when Kylie called - but then Kylie's nose told her that the scent had not been renewed. The unexplained departure of an established female can only mean that something sinister has happened to her. Her haunts, therefore, are no longer considered safe for possums. Kylie, though she might well have been immediately responsible for Snoopy's departure, had no more idea than I did of her ultimate fate.

At the time, however, I didn't know that. All I knew was that Kylie had more idea that I of what was going on outside in possum terms, and when I failed to find any trace of Snoopy the third night, I began to feel, `intuitively', that she was dead. I kept going automatically - by now I was

very tired - and kept checking through the bush, day and night, and leaving my phone number at the houses round the block.

By this time I just moved along the pattern I'd worked out without really thinking. I even left my phone number at one of the houses right down on Mona Vale Road, set in acres of cleared ground, with no possum route going anywhere near it, complete with loose guard-dogs. The people were very sympathetic, as everyone was, but highly sceptical. I was sceptical, too. I'd as soon expect a possum on the roof of Sydney Tower as there, but by that time any departure from the program that required me to think was likely to result in my stopping altogether.

The fourth night produced no more results than any of the preceding ones. After I'd checked the road at sunrise, I went down to my parents' place for a few hours' rest: I'd been unable to sleep in the bed that Snoopy should have been on the end of; I kept dreaming that she was back, and waking up to find that it wasn't true.

I got back about mid-morning, and the phone rang almost immediately. It was the people from the impossible location, the place down on Mona Vale Road.

Snoopy had shown up on the concrete, uncovered balcony, about 6 A.M., when I'd been out on my 2-hour road search. They were rather put out that I hadn't been home when they rang - understandably, as it must have looked very much as if, having made a pest of myself all round the neighbourhood and put people to trouble on Snoopy's account, I didn't care enough about her to take the trouble to be home myself.

Considering where they were, and having already answered false alarms, knowing only too well that Snoopy was visually indistinguishable from any other possum to anyone but me - she was very small for her age, but unless you knew what her age was, you would simply have assumed she was a younger possum - I refused to be optimistic. They were sure it was Snoopy - she behaved too docilely for a wild possum - but I also knew only too well how much possums of the stamp of Erik or Sextus or any of the Newport bunch seemed like someone's pet, if you weren't familiar with suburbanite possums as a whole. And any frightened or injured suburbanite can behave very docilely in the daytime. But of course I went at once.

It was Snoopy, all right. The people, thank heavens, had been kind and thoughtful enough to give her some apple and let her hide, covered, in the darkest corner of the balcony. When they'd first found her, she'd seemed quite uninjured, and was nosing in the garbage can for food. But by the time I arrived, the reaction had set in. She was effectively unconscious, and incapable of knowing where she was, or recognising anyone.

I got her home to bed as quickly as possible. By now her condition seemed even worse. The only visible injuries were a fairly bad bite on her abdomen - I later found a couple of lesser ones - and a deep cut on the underside of the outer finger of one hind foot. Nothing serious enough to account for her condition. It looked like the same old emotional factors again - she was dying of simply being lost. She continued to grow weaker, and I didn't dare move her to take her to the vet.

I started applying the old warm milk technique in the hope of rousing her. After about an hour she seemed to rally a little, and weakly licked my hand, but then she slipped back and was pretty clearly dying. I'd seen enough of the imitation by now to know the difference.

There wasn't any specific reason that I could see - she was by no means starving, as was to be expected, since there was plenty of edible secondary growth, even at ground level. All I could do was to keep on doing what I was doing, and hope.

I did the right thing entirely by accident. I gave her some

milk that was too hot. That roused her all right. Momentarily there was a highly indignant little possum, who sat up and took stock of her surroundings. At last she fully realised where she was. After that she slipped into a more natural sleep.

She couldn't move that night. I managed to get some food into her, but after that she went back to sleep again. She'd done that before, and I'd known other recuperating possums to sleep for a couple of days and nights straight, but she wasn't much better the second night. She woke up for a while, and I carried her round the house, and let her sniff her key places, but she went back to sleep after dinner. By the third day she'd improved, but not very much. She looked as if she could stand travelling, so I took her to the vet. This, whatever it was, seemed to require more than just bed and food. But he couldn't find any major injuries either.

The bite was a bad one, but no real damage had been done; the cut on her hind foot was deep, but the nerves were intact, and the finger still reacted. He gave her a penicillin injection, which somewhat relieved my mind: I didn't know whose teeth were responsible for that bite, but if they were Kylie's then I knew from my own experience that she didn't exactly keep them sterile.

The foot was, however, obviously giving Snoopy pain, and I wished very much that there was some sort of analgesic that is safe for possums. It was then I learned that even aspirin can do serious harm; I was lucky I'd never given her more than the tiniest bit, not from knowledge, but from vague ideas about shock victims and sedatives of any kind.

The third night she could move a little, and got up for a few minutes, nosing her food, and trying a very weak scuttle. But she crawled back under the bed very soon. I transferred her to the top where I could attend to her, and gave her her food by hand again.

It was clear now that she was going to get better, and that she was reassured that she was safe. But she was going to need a fairly lengthy convalescence. I wasn't feeling too good myself, by that stage, so I decided to remove us both to our baby home at Newport.

Snoopy seemed to benefit by the change. She knew where she was at Newport, too, and there were no cats, no Kylie, and no territorial responsibilities there to worry her. She was on her feet, a little stiff, but very chipper, in a couple of days.

Her foot, however, did not improve. It didn't that I accidentally knocked her coming in the bedroom door, to which she had apparently been scuttling. It no longer seemed to give her any pain - the digit no longer seemed to be alive at all. She was due back to the vet for a check three days after her first visit. By that time it was evident that all but the first phalange had mortified. At that stage there was no safe general anaesthetic for possums.[t] Since she was no longer in pain, the best course seemed to be to let the wasted finger drop off of its own accord.

It was in fact a very minor defect. Any other possum would have adjusted to it in a couple of weeks. Snoopy indeed was gradually starting to climb again, and, so long as the claw was still on, even when it was hanging by a piece of skin, she still climbed quite confidently, and still jumped her old eighteen inches. But at that stage the claw seemed more of a nuisance than an assistance, so I severed the remaining dead piece of skin.

I won't forget the bewildered, reproachful look she gave me. The claw had been worse than useless, but as long as it was there she'd believed it was going to get better. I took it away. Poor Snoopy, with her

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t. At least one which is relatively safe has since been found.

weak back legs, needed all the claws she had to prevent her from falling - or thought she did. She couldn't understand why I'd done such a thing to her.

From then on, she stopped jumping, and whenever she was up a tree curled her tail tightly round the branches to stop herself falling. The physical injury in fact hadn't made much difference: a possum without her history of falling out of trees would have compensated automatically after a few weeks and ceased to notice it. But Snoopy believed she was likely to slip and fall, and so very often did.

When she moved without thinking, as when she chased an intruder out of her house, she could do everything she'd ever been able to do. But as soon as she had to stop before she moved, and think, she lost all confidence, and refused to make the attempt.

Fate seemed determined to confirm my role in the affair in her eyes. The dead part of the claw came off at the first joint, but the necrosis had started a little above it. The result was that part of the bone protruded, the spectre of osteomyelitis reared its head, and some weeks later the bone had to be trimmed back, under local anaesthetic. the anaesthetic didn't take very well, and I had to hold her. There was, of course, blood everywhere, and once again her foot gave her pain for a few days. It wasn't a pleasant experience for either of us.

Even years later, it was evident that she held me responsible. Once the principle of ducking in the rainwater barrel as the ultimate punishment for refractory cats and possums was established, I used it when I had to. The other members of the menagerie probably saw the inside of that barrel on more than twenty occasions. Snoopy merited it only twice, but on one of those occasions she scratched a finger on a front foot. It was the most minute scratch that anyone could imagine, but she had hysterics. She was sure I'd done it again, and she was going to lose that finger, too. Only after a couple of days, when the scratch had disappeared completely, did she start to believe that it would be all right.

Yet, to her eternal credit, she never held it against me. She trusted me implicitly, and she forgave me for what she thought I'd done, just as she forgave me when I accidentally trod on her tail.

The injury was genuinely more serious in her case than in the case of a possum with normally strong back legs, and it took a couple of months for her to recover from it entirely. Her ground movements, of course, were back to normal fairly soon. She had an almost imperceptible limp, and the only real effect was to upset her balance when she stood right up in the alert position, so that she swayed from side to side. Other possums sway too - again it was a matter of degree. Her limp was far more audible than visible - her now uneven little scuttle became absolutely characteristic. The discrepancy in the sound was caused not by one foot taking more weight than the other, but by fewer claws hitting the floor on one side than on the other.

The emotional wounds took much longer to heal. After she came back, she started to have nightmares.

There was no doubt whatever about the subject matter. Her struggles, and cries, and frantic running movements made it only too clear. When they got too bad, I would put my hand over her head, so she could smell it, and assure her, over and over again, that she wasn't a lost possum, that she was a found possum, that she'd never be a lost possum again. And gradually she would become calmer, and the dream would finally turn into a lip-smacking one. The words had meaning only for me - to her they were a ritual repetition of sounds - but the message got through to her. Given the difficulty of communications, that's as near as you can come

to making a promise to an animal.

I had nightmares, too. I dreamed about looking for her, further and further away, through more and more unfamiliar country, and never finding her. Then I would wake up and find her cuddling my feet. And as I stirred she would half wake up herself, and lick my feet, comforting them as she did her own baby, `It's only a dream, go back to sleep, it's not time to get up yet.'

When she was awake, she was very sensitive about the missing finger. Again, I've seen the same sort of thing in a dog - an old warrior, the acknowledged boss of the local dogs, who had to have most of his teeth out. He knew he couldn't bite any more, and that was a reflection on his doghood. Snoopy was the same about her foot. She didn't like having it looked at, and tended to hide it from view if she saw me taking any notice of it. Normally an open wound is best left to the possum itself to clean, but when the bone was trimmed back the wound was open for some days: with her ground-dwelling habits too well confirmed I had to try to keep it covered, and therefore treat it myself with antibiotic powder several times a day to keep it clean. Once that was over, however, I looked at her foot as little as possible.

She was a friend of mine, you see, and I didn't see any point in distressing her more than necessary.

She was in no danger of forgetting the experience, but she was only cured of the actual injury when she forgot about it. It was a very harrowing time for both of us: there was no point in dwelling on it more than necessary.

And that's why I can't, in fact, swear to which foot the injury was on. Not because, as people tended to assume, I couldn't have cared less about her or it, but because she herself cared too much about it. And, out of common courtesy and the respect due to any friend, of whatever species, I didn't want to upset her by forever drawing attention to something she didn't want noticed.

After about a week at Newport, she started to show signs of wanting to go home: she had business back there, a territory and position to maintain.

So we went back to Ingleside. At first I kept her inside, taking her out only on my shoulder and carrying her round her trees, letting her sniff them and re-mark them where necessary. And heaven help Kylie if she showed up: she could quite well have been entirely innocent, and, if not, the bites themselves were not particularly devastating; but there was no way that she wasn't the main suspect. In fact she had the sense to leave us alone. She still didn't quite seem to know what was going on, and the Empty Nest reaction was still to some extent in force.

Reconstruction

On one occasion when I had Snoopy on my shoulder I saw what was all too clearly almost certainly a re-enactment of what had happened. When we reached a certain place at the southern end of Snoopy's old territory, she suddenly panicked. She ran in circles, more and more terrified, and I had to catch her to calm her down. The place was just out of sight of the house, and just beyond her old boundary. She quite simply didn't know, in her fright, how to get back. Had she stopped to think, or gone up a tree to orientate herself, she would have been in no difficulty. But apparently something had frightened her and incapacitated her at that point.

I found what was probably the rest of her route the same way. To try to avoid a similar occurrence I was taking her a few yards beyond the known area each way, to teach her the way back. One place she would <u>not</u> go was the band of hakea and low scrub that connected the creek vegetation with the strip of secondary growth along Lane Cove Road. She simply jumped off

my shoulder and raced back to the house, across the cleared ground.

I myself knew how confusing that band of scrub could be. Even with my added height it was impossible to see more than the occasional patch of sky once I was in it. When I was looking for her, on one occasion I'd come out on the wrong side of the band, quite convinced that I was heading back towards the house, and was utterly bewildered: the pattern of visible street lights was exactly the same on the wrong side as on the right side, and the lighting and general structure of the house at which she showed up very closely resembled that of the house on the rise above us towards Chiltern Road. I expected, and Snoopy would have expected, that our house would be somewhere in between, hidden by the dip in the land.

It was now fairly obvious what had happened. Snoopy, probably following Erik, whose territory extended further towards Mona Vale Road than hers, had got just beyond the point where she knew the way back and run into trouble - with Kylie, probably, or possibly with another female who sometimes used the area a little upstream from her territory. The bites themselves were serious enough to prevent her from climbing, and, either at this stage or later, she cut her foot, which settled the matter: the block next door was littered with junk of all description, abandoned cars, bits of corrugated iron, broken bottles and so forth, apart from natural hazards like sharp sticks and stones.

Running blindly, she'd got herself up into the hakea band; the rising ground makes the house invisible from only fifty yards away in that direction. Lacking, as she obviously did, any innate sense of compass direction, she'd gone the wrong way, and there was nothing to set her right. On the third night after she disappeared it had started to rain, with the usual concomitant flash flood in the creeks. Scent trails which have been constantly renewed are very durable, but her only guide would have been her own lightly laid trail, if any, and in any case no scent trail lasts if the surfaces on which it is laid, ground and branches, are carried away bodily, as happens in storms like that.

Unable even to climb a tall tree to re-orientate herself, she'd continued to go in the wrong direction until, failing to find the right house, she had in desperation gone to the only one she could find.

4. Madam Householder.

The combination of Kylie outside and a fresh injury which impeded her climbing meant that Snoopy now, even more than before, came to regard the house as her core territory. Compared with Kylie's monstrous domain it was minute, but, given the facilities it contained, it compared quite favourably with Jenny's core territory at Newport, the roof, and the immediately adjacent trees on three sides. Snoopy was about two when she disappeared: as she grew older, she, like Jenny, lavished more and more attention on her core territory, at the expense of the further reaches, which she visited less frequently.

And there was an unfortunate change in direction in which those further reaches lay, which only became apparent, and fixed, some months later.

I hadn't in fact seen Erik for some time, and presumed he had either moved on, or been caught in the last batch of slaughter on Mona Vale Road - dead, and without his own personal mannerisms, I wouldn't have been able to identify him, and didn't particularly try.

But he turned up, perky as ever, a few weeks after Snoopy returned, and took up the old routine which he employed whenever he was in our part of the world. He showed up at the window, and sometimes camped in the roof, about one day in three, which suggested something I later confirmed, that his territory for this part of his migration cycle was about three nights' journey long, with us in the middle.

He re-appeared just after Snoopy had had the bone on her finger trimmed back, while the wound was still bandaged, when, for both physical and psychological reasons, her climbing was at its worst. Snoopy was experimenting with the small trees near the house, but when Erik arrived she started to follow him.

He, still not entirely used to this unusual lady, took his handout and moved a few bushes away. Snoopy followed, as best she could, and again he moved further away. She kept trying to follow him, and finally, mildly irritated, he went off at half pace, leaving Snoopy helplessly struggling in the bushes, pitifully calling after him, `Come back! Come back!' I collected her as soon as possible and took her inside.

I made it a firm rule that she was never again to go out alone in the mating season. The implications of that episode were too dire: Snoopy, Jenny's daughter, had inherited her mother's sexual proclivities; she was also a possum who had had the opportunity to develop the tenderer side of her nature by not only having had a baby, but also a permanent non-possum friend - human in this case. She was also emotionally young for her age - her necessary dependence on me meant that she was, to a certain extent, still a juvenile, a situation reinforced by Kylie's behaviour towards us. Most possums fall in love once or twice, if at all, in their first couple of seasons. Given the combination of factors, it was inevitable that Snoopy fell in love every time. She would follow a male who was not immediately willing. She was also a possum who could get lost, and one habituated to travelling by ground rather than tree routes - at that point she physically had no other option anyway - and so far more vulnerable to dogs and cats. I stuck by that rule for more than eighteen months.

Third Mating

Erik, however, did come back - about a week later. He came to the window, and the combination of Snoopy's pleas and my culinary blandishments persuaded him to come in. Under the circumstances, I had no qualms about procuring for Snoopy. But Erik's performance was very perfunctory, and Snoopy herself was no longer at sexual peak. There was no live issue from the mating, and I didn't really expect any.

Kylie & Shrimp

Kylie had stayed away from the house, sleeping frequently in the trees down the creek, for a while, but when her baby was nearing the stage where it would make its first public appearance, she moved back into her old nest over the bedroom.

The baby was a little on the thin side, but perfectly well developed and vociferously independent at an early stage. I named it Shrimp, *pro tem.*, for lack of anything better. Kylie temporarily mended her ways, and brought the baby with her when she politely asked for a hand-out, which the youngster was soon eagerly sharing.

Rather to my surprise, Kylie made no objection to my attentions to the baby. On the contrary, she was on her best behaviour on such occasions. She was also only too pleased to get an extra treat in the roof during the day: particularly when it was hot, she favoured iced watermelon, something Snoopy wasn't keen on, iced or otherwise. So I had ample opportunity to observe the baby - it was another female, as I soon discovered - and follow its development by ear and eye.

Kylie had borne another like herself. After only a couple of

weeks Shrimp was protesting about being cleaned, even more raucously than Kylie herself, on a par with Jenny's prize offspring, Twiddly and Big Brat. Shrimp followed her mother under her own power, rather than riding on her back, very early, and was quite frequently some distance away from her in the bush.

Only a month after her first public appearance a crisis occurred. Kylie arrived back in a panic, alone, and frantically searching for the baby. She couldn't find her anywhere, and in her desperation even turned to me, asking me where she was. I had occasionally retrieved the little imp for her when she wandered too far in the first couple of days. But I didn't have her this time, and I had no idea where she was. But Kylie's pleas were desperate, so I went and made a token search of her known trees: I didn't see how I could find Shrimp if Kylie couldn't - she herself would have checked the same trees, and, if Shrimp were in fact hiding there, she certainly wouldn't reveal her presence to me as she would to her own mother. I had no success, and returned to the house.

Kylie, meantime, had gone off to look somewhere else. After a while, I heard the baby come back over the roof and go into the nest above the bedroom. I thought Kylie must have found her and brought her back, but no Kylie appeared. An hour or so later Kylie turned up on the roof again, still frantically searching. I tried to tell her where Shrimp was, but our communications weren't that good.

Eventually her own frantic re-checking of all possible places brought her back to the nest. I heard what was happening from below, having given them both up as a bad job and gone to bed. Kylie, her movements still frantic, poked her head into the nest. There was a pause, then Kylie, her movements relaxed and confident again, started to go into the nest.

She was greeted by the most horrendous screams and oaths. Shrimp was a little female possum in her nest, and Another Possum, a huge one, was trying to get in.

Kylie was not lacking in the innate tact possessed by most mother possums. She withdrew her head and casually wandered a few feet across the roof, and sat down to meditate, apparently unconcerned. After a while she made another attempt to go and attend to her baby, acting hypernaturally normally, as if she were not in the least anxious about its condition. She just started to go into the nest as she did every night. But the ruse failed. She met with the same reception.

This time she persisted, moving in inch at a time. At every move she made there was a fresh outbreak of hysterics from Shrimp. Finally Kylie had all of herself under the roof. Shrimp squawked, and withdrew further in, where the space was too narrow for Kylie to follow without difficulty. Kylie, not yet in her normal position, remained where she was, apparently hoping the baby would gradually recognise her and come to her of its own accord. It didn't.

Finally Kylie moved towards it. Shrimp yelled and retreated even further. After that Kylie gradually eased herself towards it, a fraction at a time. The yells continued, but gradually became more subdued. At last she reached it and started to lick it. That produced complete uproar, but slowly the volume decreased, until it was just the usual bath-time protestations, and eventually died out altogether. Kylie had her baby back.

But not for long. After that Shrimp started to make a practice of going in first, and greeting her mother with extreme hostility. After a couple of weeks of this Kylie moved down to the nest over the laundry, leaving Shrimp in undisputed possession of the one over the bedroom. From there she could still keep a maternal eye, if a somewhat distant one, on her

wayward offspring.

Shrimp was pretty nearly independent in her activities by that stage, and, before she was three months old, had already spent the odd night away from the house. So when she failed to return one night, I didn't take much notice. Nor, apparently, did Kylie. But Shrimp had disappeared for good.

Less than three months is too early, even for a possum like Shrimp. After that I noticed the skull of a possum about her size in a crevice in the rocks on the vacant block next door, though I can't say whether or not it had been there previously.

When Shrimp declared herself independent, and particularly after she disappeared, Kylie had leisure to renew her persecutions of Snoopy and me. A true granddaughter of Jenny, she was once again in early pregnancy, and that didn't improve her temper one iota. Snoopy was just starting to go out again, and conflict was inevitable.

For the most part I managed to arrive on the scene in time: Snoopy would have vanished, and all I would find would be Kylie or Erik, who, in one way or another, proceeded to haunt me - Kylie variously for murderous purposes or for extra food, Erik the insatiable always for food and more food. About an hour after they'd both finally gone off Snoopy would appear unscathed from the bushes, or turn up at the house, sometimes with exaggerated air of nonchalance, and a pressing need to assert her adult dignity by walking home herself, and snubbing any signs of mothering on my part. She'd been all right, and she could manage very well without my help, thank you.

To my knowledge, Kylie caught up with her only three times in all after the Lost Possum episode. The first time was early in the piece, when I heard the yells from a tree near Snoopy's southern boundary. They were right up the top of the tree, Snoopy clinging to a branch for dear life, by this time apparently all but unconscious. Her eyes were closed and her long ears laid back on her neck like a hare, while Kylie struck at her back, again and again and again, with no sign of letting up. I yelled and waved the torch: Snoopy shot me a look of misery and Kylie regarded me momentarily with surprise, then went back to what she was doing.

It was only too apparent what was going on. A retreating rump is an unfailing aggression stimulus. As long as it remains within range it must be bitten. And that was what Kylie was doing. Snoopy, with her injured foot, either couldn't climb well enough to escape, or thought she couldn't, and so used another fear reflex, clinging. Under these circumstances there was no inhibition mechanism to tell Kylie to stop - she would go on biting as long as the Other Possum remained in range. Snoopy, already terrified, and becoming even more so, would continue to cling on until the danger had passed. Stalemate.

I tried throwing sticks and pebbles, but they were too far up for me to reach. I was aiming at Kylie, but all I managed to do was hit Snoopy on one occasion. She had once more lapsed into apparent unconsciousness, and revived temporarily in surprise, to find her situation no better. I raced back to the house for some bread and tried to lure Kylie down, equally without success.

Finally, however, Kylie's own intelligence saved the situation. The object of the exercise was to remove the intruder from her territory, and the offending presence from critical distance, and her activities were not producing the desired result. So she backed off a few branches, and gave Snoopy a chance to get away. Snoopy didn't move. At long, long last Kylie came down. By a combination of bribery and threats, after one false attempt I eventually persuaded her to go up a different tree. In her own

sweet time, she gradually mooched off into the adjacent trees. Snoopy still didn't move. It took me an hour before I could coax her down. She started to come at one point, then apparently noticed Kylie still somewhere nearby, changed her mind, and went up a different branch.

By the time she finally did come down, she'd already reached the stage of trying to recover her dignity, and allowed me to carry her back to the house on my shoulder only as a special concession. She hadn't really needed me, she said. To my great relief, and my great astonishment, her actual injuries were not in fact serious. Kylie's attack had looked horrible, and, in that situation, seemed potentially lethal, but evolution hadn't entirely let Snoopy down. She'd taken most of the bites on her rump, the part of a possum's anatomy designed for such treatment, if not so prolonged and so severe. The more vulnerable underside had been protected by the branch. In possum terms, she'd taken a bad hiding. She was a bit stiff for the next few days, and confined her activities to her own proper place, her core territory, the house.

The next episode was considerably later, and more serious in its implications. Kylie caught Snoopy on the ground, just outside the house. She had her pinned on her back, and was savagely attacking her abdomen. I was bare-handed, and my nerve failed me when it came to intervening without some protection. Luckily, there was an old hessian bag, still wet, which had been spread out nearby to dry. I threw this over them, and it startled Kylie into going up a nearby bush long enough for me to rescue Snoopy and get her back to the house. This time the bite was more serious: Kylie had pinned Snoopy on the ground and concentrated on one spot on her abdomen. More usually a possum in a serious fight will take as much out as it can with one bite, then bite again, doing the same in a different place, but Kylie had struck and struck again in the same place, working on the previous bite to go deeper and deeper. Possums have very thick skin, but even so she would have been through to Snoopy's entrails in a few more seconds, if I hadn't intervened.

After that Kylie seemed to calm down as her pregnancy progressed, and gradually spent more time away from the house again, coming back only for a hand-out, and that not every night: in the end, we didn't see her for weeks at a time. There was only one other major fight between Snoopy and Kylie, and that, after the birth of Kylie's next baby, without serious consequences. It was once again in the trees near the southern end of Snoopy's old territory, but this time I found Kylie up the tree and no Snoopy. I waited and hunted around for about five or ten minutes, and then I heard a soft baby cry from the middle of a clump of pampas, and found Snoopy, not spreadeagled this time, but sitting looking stunned, and rather foolish. Through luck or sense she'd managed to get herself out of the tree this time.

Change in outside territory

Snoopy now went out more rarely than of old, but I didn't want to risk another Lost Possum episode, so I still went out after her whenever I thought there was trouble: about one time in three. But now I didn't find her. All I encountered was Kylie or Erik - Erik more rarely as time went on until, by the time Kylie's next baby came out of the pouch, he really seemed to have vanished for good. And when, in despair, I returned to the house, Snoopy would be sitting up waiting for me, sometimes rather aggrieved that I'd gone for a walk without her.

At first I thought that it was the same pattern as had developed before her disappearance: after a skirmish, whether she was involved or not, she would take cover in the bush somewhere, and make her way back to the house while the others were busy with me. But even then I sometimes found her: now I found her not at all. I started watching where she went when she

left, and discovered that instead of going down the track, then upstream, she now went straight down to the creek, crossed it, and then followed it downstream, to the north.

That put an entirely different complexion on matters.

While I had few inhibitions about wandering on to vacant bushland, the block next door downstream was occupied, and I simply couldn't go prowling about in someone else's back yard, in the middle of the night, without reason. When an emergency occurred, or I thought one did, I was prepared to do a minor version of Not Seeing myself, in regard to fence lines - there wasn't exactly time to detour to the house, wake the occupant, and ask permission, in any case. But I couldn't follow her regularly, and get to know her territory as I had learned to know her previous one. I could go so far, and then I had to stop: human territorial boundaries and possum ones just don't coincide.

I tried to persuade Snoopy to go the other way, but with no success. Her solution to the problem was the obvious possum one - Kylie now owned her old upstream territory, so she found herself somewhere else to go. There was no way in the world that she could understand my objections - they just didn't make possum sense. In the end I had to let her have her own way - she was far more cognisant than I with possum conditions outside, and more than old enough to know what she was doing.

In fact she did know what she was doing: from that point onwards it was a matter of false alarms, not genuine ones. She occasionally still had a brush with Kylie - her changeover, like almost all possum developments, was gradual, not abrupt, and in any case both possums sometimes used the bushes along the central creek area between the two adjacent properties. Like Erik, though less frequently, Kylie also sometimes ranged downstream a little. I found out by ear - following the movements of departing or arriving possums through the bush - that there were at least two standard possum routes which met at the point where Snoopy most frequently crossed the creek, one, that most often followed by Snoopy, alongside the creek itself, the other with alternatives on either side of the fence-line, branching off from it at right angles, up to the next-door house, where the possums were also fed; Erik quite often appeared from that direction.

The two females, Snoopy and Kylie, therefore partially solved their differences by just staying out of each other's way. Kylie, on her side, began at last to concede, reluctantly, that Snoopy owned the house, inside - the main part of it, that is: she continued to assert herself in the roof, in the cats' room, and, occasionally, on the veranda. Snoopy, in fact, owned nothing beyond the study window, not the small lawn outside, not the Xmas bushes beside the house, not even the tank stand against the window, which Kylie used to gain access, instead of Snoopy's plank.

But, if Kylie dared come in that window, matters changed.

Snoopy, the territory holder, close to her actual nest, would make a charge, and Kylie would retreat. If Kylie showed signs of fight, I got into the act, and that was enough to settle matters.

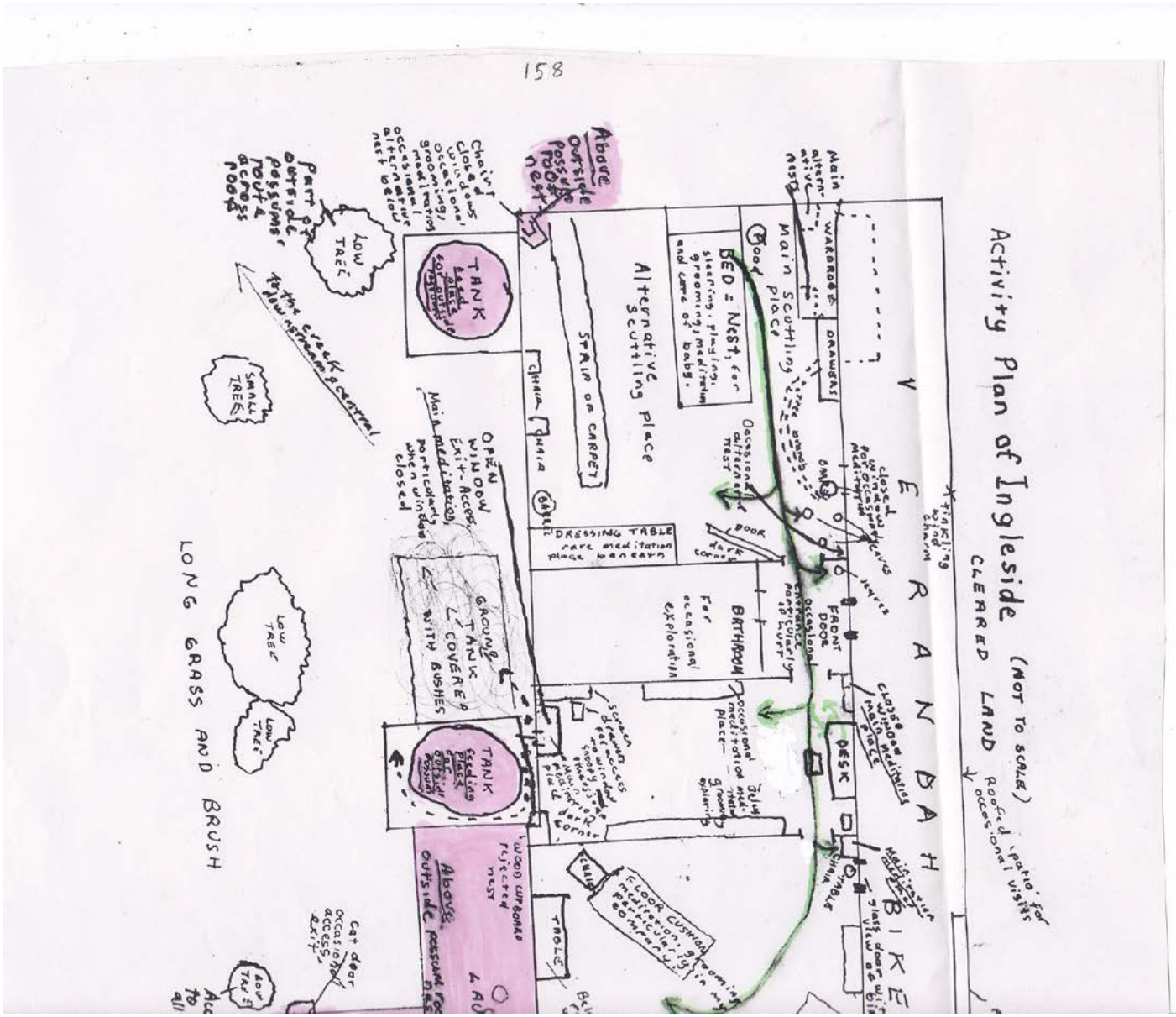
Once the system had been established, variations were possible. Kylie was sometimes permitted to eat her food on the window sill, then depart in peace. Snoopy, feeling either lazy or not particularly brave, would stay in the bedroom until she had gone. But sometimes Snoopy would start prowling around the study floor, looking for something to bite - like my ankles, on occasion, if they foolishly crossed her path - looking everywhere but up at the window sill, lashing her tail from side to side in a manner that otherwise indicated agitation, with an element of indecision, will I go out or won't I?, and so forth. If Kylie failed to take the hint,

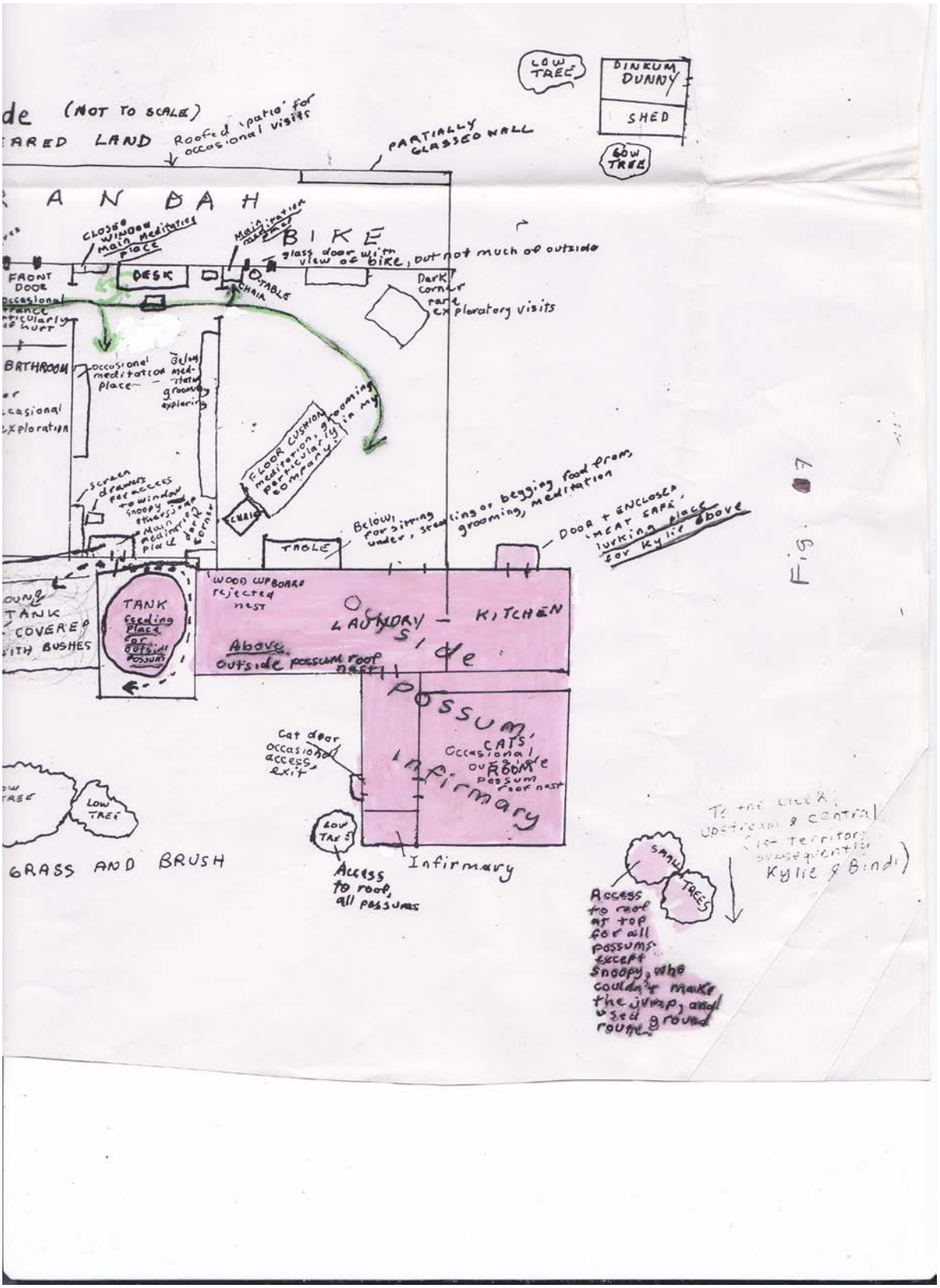
or, worse still, came further into the room, the tail lashing ceased to mean indecision - will I chase her or won't I? - and simply became a gesture of fury. Kylie would be ejected with celerity, Snoopy hard behind her, following her as far as the window sill, then glaring after her, dancing up and down and lashing her tail in pure rage. And, as with Erik, if Kylie intruded beyond the bedroom door, that was that, no matter what Snoopy's previous mood. She was removed from the premises, forthwith.

At first I did everything I could to avoid such confrontations, feeding Kylie on the tank before it was quite dark when she was sleeping in the roof, or, when she was sleeping elsewhere, running out with her dinner as soon as I heard her coming over the roof. But I didn't always hear Kylie come, so, when it became evident from the intrusions she did manage that she no longer entertained serious designs on Snoopy's house, I ceased to be so punctilious.

I anticipated her when I could, but, when an incident did occur, I simply let Snoopy handle it unless Kylie showed signs of fight. Snoopy never hurt her, if only because she couldn't catch her. The most she could achieve was a couple of handfuls of wool from the retreating rump. Once Snoopy had despatched her, I ducked round the back and consoled the evictee with her hand-out. It didn't seem too bad an idea for Snoopy to have pleasure of removing intruders from her territory, the prerogative of all female possums, as long as Kylie didn't become persistent enough to worry her.

If Snoopy was the acknowledged proprieoress of the interior of the house, however, her outside holdings, wherever they actually were, were more problematic. On the occasions I accompanied her, or met her, I don't recall ever seeing her chest-mark anything, so probably she held no real personal territory, but confined her excursions to the border zone between Kylie and the possums down near Cicada Glen Road, which was more or less common ground. It was, however, rather difficult for her to reach this area, when Kylie owned all the immediate surroundings of the house. She was apparently permitted to be downstream, but she had to get there first.


158
Activity Plan of Ingleside (NOT TO SCALE)
CLEARED LAND
Roofed patio for occasional visits
Tinkling wind chime
VERANDAH
BIKE
Main activity nest
WARDROBE
DRAWERS
Main Scuttling place
BED = Nest, for sleeping, playing, grooming, meditating and care of baby.
Occasional alternative nest
Closed door for occasional meditation
FRONT DOOR
Occasional entrance for visitors
DESK
Glass doors with view of bird life
Alternative scuttling place
STRIP OF CARPET
CHAIR
BARREL
DRESSING TABLE rare meditation location
BOOK
BATHROOM
For occasional exploration
Occasional meditation place
Above outside possum roof nest
Chair for closed door occasional grooming meditation
Part of outside possums route across roofs
TANK
LOW TREE
SMALL TREE
The creek is central
OPEN WINDOW Exit - Access
Main meditation particularly when window closed
GROUND TANK COVERED WITH BUSHES
TANK feeding place
WOOD CUPBOARD rejected nest
Above outside possum roof
FLOOR CUSHION for occasional meditation particularly for Mummy
TABLE
Cat door access to and exit
LONG GRASS AND BRUSH


(NOT TO SCALE)
LOW TREE
DINKUM DUNNY
SHED
LOW TREE
PARTIALLY GLASSED WALL
Roofed 'patio' for occasional visits
BIKE
glass door with view of BIKE, but not much of outside
DESK
CHAIR
STABLE
FRONT DOOR
Dark corner part exploratory visits
BATHROOM
occasional meditation place
FLOOR CUSHION meditation, particularly company
TABLE
Below for sitting under, scrounging or begging food from, grooming, meditation
DOOR + ENCLOSED MEAT SAFE, lurking place for Kylie above
TANK
TANK COVERED WITH BUSHES
TANK feeding Place for outside possum
WOOD CUPBOARD rejected nest
LAUNDRY — KITCHEN
Above outside possum roof nest
possum side
possum, CATS, occasional ROOM
possum roof nest
Infirmary
Cat door occasional access exit
LOW TREE
LOW TREE
GRASS AND BRUSH
Access to roof, all possums
SMALL TREES
Access to roof at top for all possums except Snoopy, who couldn't make the jump, and used ground route
Kylie & Bindi)
Fig. 7

Inside Not surprisingly, she became less and less inclined to make the effort and run the gauntlet. She had all the facilities she needed - leaves, human food, nest, meditation places, room for exercise and scuttling - in her own core territory, the house. So she concentrated the attention, and lavished the affection, she would normally have directed to a somewhat larger territory on the house - the bedroom in particular, but, as her confidence increased and her knowledge extended to every inch of the place, she found a use for each part of her domain, scuttling now, occasionally, in every part of the main house.

Her routines, too, became more elaborate and more fixed - her first task on waking was to orientate herself and inspect her dinner if I'd already put it out. (In later times I waited till she woke up, because I found that she liked me to make a performance of presenting it to her, leaving out only some scraps from the previous night in case she had urgent need of a snack.) Then she had to locate me. If I were working at my desk, she would come and inspect my legs, chest-rubbing them to show they were hers as she did with her own particular furniture. I was supposed to greet her and say, `You're you and I'm me - you're the right possum and I'm the right person.' I knew it was important to her that the right pair of legs should be in the right place - she checked so carefully almost every night - but I didn't realise how important it was until a couple of incidents made it palpably clear.

The night finally arrived when the legs under the desk were not the right legs. Her worst suspicious were confirmed, and she knew exactly what to do. She bit the offending legs, as hard as she could. Fortunately my landlady, who had been using the phone, has a sense of humour. At all other times, and in all other places around the house, she was a welcome visitor as far as Snoopy was concerned, but the Wrong Legs in a key position where only the Right Legs should be was not to be tolerated.

On another occasion what she suspected might be the Wrong Legs suddenly appeared in the bedroom. Coming home after dark one night I found I'd forgotten my key, and had to climb in the window. No sooner had my feet touched the floor when there was a possum wrapped around my calves, tensed for the attack, inspecting the intrusive legs very, very closely indeed. I am infinitely grateful that they did in fact prove to be the Right Legs.

When she got up, instead of deciding whether or not she would go out, immediately, she now usually waited until after dinner - my dinner, which she liked to share with me. Her own often remained untouched until later in the evening, after she came back if she made an excursion outside, once she had inspected it thoroughly to make sure that everything which ought to be there was there.

As usual, it was the social aspect of the affair which mattered. Even if I'd carefully put some of what I was having in her dish, she ignored it, in favour of begging what I was actually eating, preferably taking it right out of my mouth herself, opening my lips with her hands and removing the delicacy with her teeth. After all, that was the only 24 carat guaranty that she was getting the genuine article. But that remained a rare treat. Gentle as she always was with me, she still had claws, non-retractable ones, on her hands, and I wasn't keen to risk a Must Have reaction under those circumstances. Fortunately, we shared much the same tastes in human food, and I made a practice of always leaving a little of everything on my plate when I finished for Snoopy to try. Emily Post would undoubtedly approve, but the motivation was quite different.

Snoopy was very partial to a little lamb, and cutlet bones suited her admirably: she'd sit up waving the bone in one hand, enthusiastically stripping the crisp brown meat from along its sides, for

all the world like a scaled down Henry the Eighth with a leg of mutton. Emily Post would not have approved of her table manners.

Nor mine. Crumbed cutlets were of course a joint favourite, the covering of egg and breadcrumbs adding to the attraction, and there was a certain degree of competition for the privilege of picking the bones - being a barbarian myself, I also considered them the best part of the meal. On the last occasion I had crumbed cutlets while she was with me, one of them was cooked to perfection. I can say that with due modesty, because it was a complete fluke: I'm no cordon bleu, and I very seldom manage to get things just right. It was the very quintessence of a crumbed cutlet. I was looking forward to that bone with some degree of pleasure, but left it till the end, savouring the anticipation. I laid my plate aside momentarily when something on the T.V. caught my attention, and when I looked back, Henry the Eighth was uproariously in action.

I was not pleased with Snoopy that night. However, I decided on a course of magnanimity: she was getting far more pleasure from the bone than I would have had, so I gave her the second cutlet bone as well. Only to see it tossed casually away on the floor. The essence of the matter is a little meat is Absolutely Delicious.

After dinner, she would go and sit on the study window sill, sniffing and looking and listening, and deciding whether or not she would go out. If she decided against it, she would take up her inside business, browsing, meditating, scuttling - but often arranging matters so that she performed her activity in my vicinity, choosing to meditate in the nearest dark corner to where I was sitting, preferably beside my feet, under the desk, if I were working, or under the coffee table or on her favourite chair near the door of the lounge if I were watching T.V. or reading. She didn't like full light - as a matter of common courtesy I limited the house-lights to the single one I was using at any given time, but she still crossed lighted areas at a run, dashing from darkness to darkness. Nevertheless, if I unco-operatively didn't come and sit somewhere where she could find a suitable dark corner, she would sometimes still come and sit beside me, on my feet, or leaning against my leg, clearly not happy with the brightness, but remaining there to groom and meditate for an hour or so. Light, but constant, physical contact was what she wanted when she was in that mood. Or, she would hold my hand, if she could get possession of an unoccupied one. She couldn't hold the whole hand, so she would just take a finger, and hold it gently in her own front paw.

A dog will come and sit with you too, but when a possum does it, under those circumstances, it means rather a lot.

She was incurably curious, and wanted to participate in whatever I was doing. If I started to use a new gadget, or perform some activity she didn't understand, she'd come and ask me about it. I'd show her the object in question, and demonstrate its use, then give it to her to investigate for herself. She'd take it in her hands, if it were something the right size, sniff it carefully, and explore it thoroughly, then be satisfied. What she made of it all, I don't pretend to know. But she obviously found some possum rationale for it, and in any case, that wasn't really the main point. The crux of the matter was that she should in some way be included in my activity, as I was in hers when I went outside with her. We liked doing things together, and it was a matter of each finding a way of participating, albeit nominally, in the business of the other species.

For the most part, however, we each went on with our own business, using the various parts of the house for human or possum purposes as the case might be. If there was a suspicious silence for too many hours, one of us might go and check on the other, but in time, that became

unnecessary. I'm sure Snoopy knew what I was doing during her waking hours, just as I knew, without looking, what she was up to.

When she was in the next room, or when I was in bed at night, I could distinguish every move she made, mostly by ear, partially by smell - which part of her human dinner she was eating, some of the different leaves she was applying herself to, which window she was meditating at - and above all know her frame of mind from the sound of her scuttle, that uneven scuttle with the audible, invisible limp-that-wasn't. In the daytime, while I was working at my desk, the bed, with the reassuring possum-shaped lumps under the cover, or the burrowing gopher if she decided to get up for a midday snack, was always visible out of the tail of my eye. For the most part I didn't consciously keep watch on her - I just got on with my business, and she got on with hers. But, in a sense, we were in subliminal contact almost all the time.

I was, in fact, an integral part of Snoopy's house territory, chest-marked as such like the rest of it, just as I was an integral part of her nest, and she expected me to be there, and missed me when I wasn't. Whenever I arrived home after dark I would find two cats on the veranda, waiting for me to feed them, and a possum sitting up watching at the window, waiting for me; if I put her dinner out before I left, she wouldn't touch it until I returned.

At first she used to run to the door to greet me, but unfortunately it was a heavy door that opened inwards, and she was forever getting bumped. So then she'd just wait until I came in and called for my Tiger. Greetings over, presents, if any, in the form of her favourite leaves picked elsewhere duly accepted and attended to - placed aside for later if not eaten immediately - she would then, if she could, get possession of my shoes.

She would sniff them eagerly, turning them over in her hands, paying especial attention to the soles, and clearly distinguishing each individual scent, finding out where I'd been, who, in animal terms had been there, what I'd been doing. The more, and more varied, the scents, the better. She read my shoes like a newspaper, and was always eager to find out what was going on in the world.

Though she retained some of her baby ways, snuggling up against me at night and liking to steal food from my mouth, as she grew older she favoured the quieter forms of affection used by Mrs. Poss and Foxy with their non-possum friend, sitting quietly beside me inside, or coming down to the lowest branch and resting one hand on my shoulder if I visited her outside. But she did invent a whole new way of expressing affection, all her own.

She seldom, now, went into a Must Have reaction at the smell of some new and irresistible type of food - I knew her tastes pretty thoroughly, and by dint of switching around and trying to keep ahead of her fads could ensure that virtually every night, somewhere amongst either her human food or her leaves, there was something Absolutely Delicious; liberal supply made it unnecessary to demand. But she was, occasionally smitten by attacks of affection. She Must Have my face to kiss. She would climb up to face level, secure me by the hair - it was usually in two pigtails, which she found very convenient handles - and happily go berserk, sloshing my face and throat, and especially my ears. If she couldn't reach me, she would ask to be picked up, in her usual manner, sitting up and raising her arms like a human toddler, and, when I put her on my shoulder, set about kissing me with great delight.

Snoopy liked humans in general, but she discriminated between them. The only other person, and that only on one occasion, whom she Had to

Have to kiss, was my mother. Snoopy made her usual approaches to her, which were not understood, so she retired to a distance, ears drooping the picture of disappointment. I translated. My mother wasn't too keen on being kissed by a possum, but the disappointed look won her over, and she presented Snoopy with a very tentative cheek. Snoopy gleefully addressed herself to her ear, and was happy again. So it was at Newport that I left Snoopy on the only occasion that I myself was intentionally absent all night, taking her down the previous evening to settle in.

By this time she was thoroughly familiar with her Newport surroundings, and had developed her special routine for those physical circumstances; a welcome addition had been made to the room, in the form of a deep arm chair, which, with both comfort and the impression of security created by the surrounding arms, was an ideal place for meditating, grooming or dozing, at the same time giving easy graduated access to the window ledge which, in turn, with the protective flyscreen tried and proven, had now been appointed an additional scuttling and meditation place.

By report, the experiment met with mixed success. Snoopy ate her dinner, then made a very early night of it, putting herself back to bed, waking up hopefully when my mother came to check her, then turning away and going back to sleep when it didn't prove to be the Right Person.

Yet she was, for the most part, undemanding and undemonstrative in her affection. She didn't cloy. There were moments when she wanted petting and so asked for it; if I were too busy, she'd be disappointed, but not resentful or importunate. She'd accept the decision, just as she accepted the decision on the rare occasions when I shut her in and she wanted to go out. She didn't pester, or persist. Her affection was in any case more the quieter kind - it was important to her just to be with me, when she wanted to. But that look of disappointment was something I tried very hard to avoid as often as possible. I'm afraid that it always proved far more effective than Sheba's most protracted and insistent demands for attention and petting.

Permanent Cats: Smiley & Sheba

Sheba was Sox's daughter, the little black female, the runt of the litter. When I retrieved Snoopy after her Lost Possum episode, I made up my mind very firmly that the cats had to go - regretfully, Sox in particular. From a human viewpoint she was a darling - the perfect single pet for someone who liked cats, vivacious, affectionate, thoroughly disinclined to, and now incapable of, having hoards of kittens. But she was deadly on all other animals, and most important of all, insisted on committing the one unforgivable sin, inhibiting Snoopy's return through the window by her nocturnal cavortings.

I would have liked to have kept Patch, but it was proving impractical. She was a good-natured, undemanding cat, grateful for whatever she was given, and, once I started to feed her, no longer a problem even to Kylie, as she no longer stole her dinner from the tank. But she was an <u>old</u> cat, set in her ways, and her whole life revolved around her kittens. What was the most desirable course from the point of view of both parties in the case of Sox, namely spaying, would have been unthinkably cruel in the case of Patch. The current crop of kittens, Patch's and the remaining two from Sox's litter, between them covered every shade and hue except pure white available to non-pedigreed cats: I thought that someone must want at least some of them, but, despite my best efforts, none of them found homes.

At last my landlady came up with a solution: a relation of hers had a farm and wanted cats, and was willing to take the lot, en bloc, and dispose of any unwanted ones to friends. I didn't like doing it - it seemed too much like shoving my responsibilities on to someone else, but the offer, as they say, was genuine, and, financially and emotionally, I'd reached the

end of my tether. So I set about ferrying them to their destination on the bike, much to their displeasure.

I was particularly concerned for Sox's two remaining kittens, now a couple of months old. Though completely opposite in appearance and character - it was hard to believe they were even half brother and sister, let alone litter mates - they were by now emotionally inseparable, the nearest cats get to being twins. They'd been apart only while Smiley was at the vet for a couple of days, and I very much wanted to find them a home together. Unfortunately, their needs were different, and very hard to reconcile.

From the beginning, Smiley was a little boy, and only coincidentally a boy cat, and he'd been demonstrating the fact since he started to toddle, much to the annoyance of his little sister. He also had the same leonine attitude to the younger kittens as his foster father: he patronised them, deigning to play very gentle war games with them on occasions, or condescending to flick his tail for them to play with, watching fascinated as the little creatures batted at its twitching end.

Sheba couldn't have been more opposite; from the beginning she was essentially a little Cat, and only coincidentally female - like her mother she was born to be someone's pet. She strongly resented the younger kittens, snarling at them and driving them off: she, too, wanted to be the kitten.

Ostensibly, Smiley would have been admirably suited to life as a farm cat - a long rangy tom, he needed room to run, and built-up areas were no real place for him. But there was a hidden catch: he was, and remained for over two years, super-sensitive to ticks, and even at a year old repeated his death-bed performance, despite dog-wash and flea collars, when a tick managed to remain alive in him for only a couple of hours. In addition, he was a kind of reverse of Snoopy: always the largest and strongest of the cats, his constitution was nevertheless poor, and he was susceptible to every minor cat complaint in the book. Whereas Snoopy was almost never sick, he perpetually came down with everything from feline 'flu to sprained ankles.

While there was at least some chance he and Sheba could stay together if I gave them away with the rest, there was a still further complication. Thanks to both nature and her mother's maladministration, Sheba was, and would long remain, very weak and tiny. It is the fate of unspayed female cats in such areas to have one lot of kittens after the other from the time they are about six months old: I knew from previous experience with a smallish cat - not nearly as small as Sheba - that this effectively wears them to death in a couple of years; only cats of Patch's physique can cope with that sort of life. I offered to have Sheba spayed before I gave them away, but unfortunately this was against the principles of the people who kindly offered to dispose of them.

At that time Snoopy was still at Newport, convalescing. I took Patch and her brood on the first trip, then Smiley and Sheba, and, on the last trip, Sox. I suppose that it was inevitable that when I finally returned to Newport, I once again had a load of terrified cats on the back of the bike. At the last moment I reneged, and Smiley and Sheba came too.

I knew there were bound to be some complications, but it seemed possible that by keeping those particular two I might manage to cut out most of the potential encroachments on Snoopy's prerogatives: they already formed a separate emotional unit of two, and by keeping them together, and in their own part of the house, I should be able to keep things that way - they played and ate together, and curled up together to sleep. In fact, with some modifications, that's how it turned out.

Both the landlord and I were determined on one point: no more kittens. At the time there was a plethora of entire toms in the neighbourhood - the expansion of the cat population was governed by the number entire females. But even without that factor, their own personalities and physiques had already decided who was to suffer the unspeakable degradation: for one of them it would have been just that; for the other, had she been able to understand, the best present she could have asked for.

It put something of a strain on the relationship between them - the preferred target of Smiley's amorous attentions was and always had been his little sister, who repelled him vigorously, and with genuine anger. But nevertheless, maybe once or twice a year, she relented and obliged him, while he, for his part, seemed to have worked out the situation for himself.

At one point, for pussycat reasons known only to herself, an entire Siamese chose to fall in love with him, coming to the house in search of him, a practice which brought her into conflict with Sheba. Sheba, after initial diffidence, made the startling discovery that she was no longer the smallest cat in the world. A verbal trial of strength ensued. Smiley was at first greatly distressed that the two current lights of his life should prove incompatible; he ran from one to the other miaowing plaintively, as if asking them to be friends. The Siamese eventually left; he followed her briefly, then returned. The next time his girlfriend called he was asleep on a chair. He roused himself enough to give a single perfunctory miaow, then settled down comfortably again. He seemed to have decided that Eros was for occasions, but Agape, and his little sister, were forever. Even as adults they still occasionally washed each other, and curled up together to sleep.

Inter-relation-ship with cats

I was determined that Sox-type problems weren't going to recur, so I had introduced these kittens to Snoopy when they were quite tiny. She obviously disapproved of them - I'd been hoping that, since she herself didn't have a current baby, she might mother one of them, but that wasn't to be. So I had to make a firm rule: the cats could be king in the daytime, but whenever she was awake she took priority. In any dispute between possums and cats, the cats had to be held guilty, regardless of who actually started it.

It was unfortunate, and very unfair, but it was, with no exaggeration, a matter of life and death: Snoopy had nowhere else to go, while the cats, both of them, problems notwithstanding, were far more capable of looking after themselves than she was, and they didn't really need to be there, as she did. I couldn't see how, under the circumstance, the presence of irritant cats could have played any part in her unscheduled departure, but I couldn't take a chance on their presence motivating another one.

So I made it clear that they had to give way to her: the first sign of any aggression from either kitten resulted in the offender being picked up by the scruff of the neck, and, suspended limply, having its rump presented to Snoopy for her to chastise as she would an obstreperous baby of her own kind: taking the offending rump in both hands she would administer the punishment, a spanking or pinching with her teeth. Naturally, that frightened the life out of the kitten in question, and very few repetitions were necessary to establish the point. From then on, whatever else they did, neither cat would ever attack a possum.

It meant that, of necessity, the cats were in some sense second class citizens, but it didn't seem too hard on them - they had the run of the house whenever I was working at home during the day, their own room with excellent cat appointments, including the bed with discarded double-bed

mattress doubled over, the run of the kitchen-laundry when it was wet, and all outside, which they could peregrinate with much greater facility than Snoopy.

The scheme worked with a varied degree of success, depending on the character of the cat in question, and they were as disparate in nature as they were in physique.

Smiley, the tom, fell in with the plan as well as could be expected. He cordially detested Snoopy, and possums in general, and his immediate, and invariable, reaction to the proximity of same was to concentrate all the disgust, disapproval and contempt in his being into a single hiss, then meekly retire. He was a frank, open cat: he acknowledged the rule that possums were sacrosanct, but set a condition of his own, and no form of chastisement could ever dissuade him from expressing his opinion in that single hiss. Once that condition had been met, he was amenable to letting well enough alone, inside or outside the house, whether he thought I was there or not.

His only direct attempt on Snoopy's prerogatives was to take her favourite meditation chair as his own during the day. Snoopy's nose immediately told her of the poacher, and she, in turn, expressed her disgust, so for a time I discouraged him vigorously whenever I caught him in the forbidden place. No power on earth, however, could prevent his sneaking in when my back was turned, and so leaving his scent for Snoopy to discover when she got up, however brief his visit and however abruptly terminated. But after a few episodes, she apparently resigned herself to the situation: as long as he wasn't there when she wanted to be, that was all right.

He was, in time, however, more of a problem indirectly. Being a tom, as he grew up he wanted to go off courting at night. When they were kittens, he and Sheba were shut in their own part of the house at night, but when he reached adolescence he would no longer tolerate such treatment. Being a good-natured fellow, he'd put up with confinement for one night, as a special favour to me. But if it went on any longer, he simply set about departing, unlatching the cat-door, unscrambling, brick at a time, the complicated blockages I'd construct on either side of it, or, if all else failed, ripping the woodwork with his claws. And, having found a way out, he'd go about his business, without rancour or recrimination, for as long as it took, returning when he felt like it.

This in itself was no real problem, as his business took him away from the house, not into it. But, in letting himself out, or blackmailing me into doing so, he also let Sheba out.

Sheba couldn't have been more opposite. Not for her a *modus vivendi* based on a little give and take on each side. She was very much the same sort of cat as her mother, and, in next to no time, re-invented precisely the same tactics. All she wanted was to be the kitten, and have all my attention, all of the time - except when she was bored by it. However, it didn't take her long to find out that there was something even more privileged than the kitten: the possum. Thereafter her ambitions took a new turn, and she dedicated herself to the task of turning into the possum.

Anything Snoopy did, she considered a privilege to be coveted, regardless of whether, materially, it was any advantage over what she had. Snoopy slept on my bed, therefore Sheba took every opportunity for darting into the bedroom and jumping on the bed - her own bed in the cats' room was very much more luxuriously padded, but that was irrelevant. On the rare occasions when she was permitted there, such as Sydney's famous mini-cyclone, she imitated Snoopy's behaviour and attitudes and positions, curling up in the curve of my legs, positioning her body in the same manner,

bestowing on me the same gestures of affection, licking my hand or standing up on her hind legs with her front ones on my shoulder, to rest the underside of her body against my back - anything she saw Snoopy do, she did. Now all these mannerisms are found separately in individual cats, so it may have been coincidence, but given the combination and the circumstances, I doubt it.

Poor Sheba was doomed to disappointment, simply because of a singular lack of tact. She somehow managed to put out all the wrong signals. Where Snoopy was always polite in her requests for attention - I remember very well feeling an apologetic little tap on my leg, looking down, and saying, `Would I get off your tail? That seems a reasonable request!' - Sheba pestered and whinged for hours on end because I wouldn't give her all my attention - stopping and patting her and playing with her for a few minutes at intervals didn't help at all since she wanted all my attention all of the time.

Snoopy was in the house at night, so Sheba decided she had to be - the fact that she was in the house during the day, when Snoopy was asleep, didn't matter. No sooner did she get out of her room by her brother's kind offices than she was in the study window, seeking out the positions where scent told her Snoopy usually sat. Having learnt from Sox that the aim of the game was not the actual position, but my attention, I countered successfully for a while by removing her only when Snoopy was actually around, and ignoring her otherwise, which was not what she wanted. But she very soon discovered the delights of sitting on the window sill - with a safe retreat behind, and clear sight, hearing and scent out, it had the same sort of appeal for cats as for possums.

That, of course, was the one place she couldn't be: Snoopy coming back from one of her excursions was stopped in her tracks by the sight of a cat parked in the entrance. So I tried catching Sheba and punishing her, by water, spanking or incarceration - all to no avail. Like her mother, she very quickly learnt to exploit the advantage of the situation - if I moved to catch her from inside, she'd dart a few feet outside. I'd have to go out the front door and round the house to reach her new position, whereupon she'd go back inside, and vanish as a flicker of black as soon as I re-entered the room, reappearing on the window sill the minute I sat down. Like her mother, she was uncatchable, and enjoyed nothing as much as a game of chasings. Very soon her first move on getting into the house, night or day, was to make a dash for the window sill, and initiate the action.

The problem was logistically insoluble. Shutting Sheba in her room alone meant a kitten crying miserably for hours, and her brother, consequently, shut out, coming back in the window himself, *faut de mieux*. As long as there was access to the house for Snoopy, there was access for cats - with a different possum the problem could have been solved by making the entrance too difficult for cats, but Snoopy could climb only marginally better than they could, and couldn't jump a tenth as far - like the other possums, the cats soared from the floor to the window sill in one bound, without Snoopy's intermediate stages.

Time, however, brought amelioration: Sheba's activities reinforced the pattern already developing because of Kylie, that of shutting the window as soon as Snoopy came back in, or when she had been up for a couple of hours and shown that she had no intention of going out that night. Whereupon Snoopy would immediately get up and look eagerly out the closed window. Stricken with remorse, I'd re-open the window, Snoopy would shoot me a look of disappointment, get down, and go over to the opposite window, which was closed. So the first window was re-closed, and stayed that way.

Finding herself debarred from entry, Sheba seldom bothered to make the attempt - her intrusions, like the rarer ones of her brother, could not in any case cause the alarm of Sox's incursions. Snoopy had known both cats since they were tiny, and they had always given way to her: Sheba, in particular, was very conscious of having always been the smallest member of the menagerie, and, not surprisingly, considered discretion the better part of valour in all circumstances. On one occasion when I failed to notice that the entrance was blocked, Snoopy did indeed come back in the window, scattering cats in all directions. Failing this, she'd turn the tables by coming in through the cats' room.

While I made every effort to keep the cats out of Snoopy's way, if they persisted too much I sometimes let her deal with the situation herself. For the most part she treated them with ignore, though her body language showed that she disapproved of them. But when they became too insistent in their intrusions, she reacted as she would to inferior possums, and summarily put them out. Whereas my removals took the form of picking the offender up by the scruff of the neck, disposing of it, and administering a slap on the rear, Snoopy simply chased them, but if she caught up with them she was likely to speed them on their way with a nip on the rump, never actually biting them, but pinching hard enough to hurt. So if they chose to play the role of inferior, intrusive possums on occasions, and be treated as such, provided they didn't do it often enough to upset Snoopy with their presence or give her the idea that they were taking over her house, then that was their problem, not mine. Chasing intruders out of her territory is a normal activity for any female possum, and I wasn't too displeased that she should have the opportunity to indulge in such activities without even the minor residual dangers attached to putting Kylie out.

But for the most part she treated them as annoying, but innocuous non-possums if she encountered them in the house. Both parties, clearly, from their body attitudes, were uncomfortable in the presence of the other, but generally ignored each other until I relieved feelings all round by returning the cats to their own domain. I've since heard of a possum who had a cat as its non-possum friend,[xxiv] but Snoopy already had a non-possum friend, and only resented the extra personnel, animals who, because of their own nature, stand in much the same sort of relationship to humans as do possums of Snoopy's kind, and so were in some sense potential rivals. She didn't like them, but since I was apparently responsible for them, she put up with them when she had to. I remember coming home after dark one evening, having been unexpectedly delayed, frantically worried because I'd forgotten to close the door into the cats' domain. I knew by this stage that neither cat, alone, would harm Snoopy, but I didn't know what might happen if both cats were there together - coincidentally or otherwise, they sometimes showed signs of co-operating in their hunting efforts. But when I got there there was no sign of Smiley, who'd apparently taken one look and himself off for the night. Snoopy was sitting at one study window, Sheba at the other, each with her back firmly turned on the other.

In time, Sheba's intrusions became rarer, and, on the whole, Snoopy and the cats got along very well - separately. The battles royal with Sheba in any case mostly took part in Snoopy's absence.

Outside was a different story. The cats behaved in exactly the same manner, towards Snoopy or any other possums, Sheba prudently withdrawing to a safe distance, Smiley expressing his opinion <u>then</u> withdrawing to a safe distance. But Snoopy was a very, very cautious possum outside, and steered clear of all animals, even her own cats, shooting up a

tree at the first sign of their presence.

This proved awkward once they were no longer kittens that could be kept in at night: like Snoopy, they enjoyed going for walks with me, and fairly frequently accompanied me when I went to collect Snoopy's leaves. If I took Snoopy for a walk at night, and one or the other chanced to see us, we were likely to acquire an escort. Whereupon Snoopy would decide to stay in whatever tree she was in, refusing to come down until the cat had well and truly gone - hours, if need be.

At first I merely caught the offending cats and shut them in the house, but they rapidly learnt to stay just out of reach. Smiley would eventually go about his business if I adamantly ignored him, but Sheba, as always, was much harder to convince: she would gambol around, mewing and yabbering away, drawing as much attention to herself as possible, in the hope that I would vouchsafe her my attention, only to vanish entirely whenever I made a move towards her, and reappear as soon as I went back to Snoopy. It took a very long time to convince her to go and play somewhere else, or let herself be caught and incarcerated. A pure black cat is not the easiest thing to catch in the scrub at night.

In time, that game, too, lost its novelty, and was only played on occasions, but in the meantime that, together with Snoopy's growing maturity and competence, reinforced the pattern of her going out alone at Ingleside, so that our Newport walks became more in the nature of a rare treat. It was me the cats were interested in, not Snoopy, and my presence attracted them when they would otherwise have simply passed by on their own errands - she was better off without me.

Poor Sheba had other losing ways. Like her mother, she was a devotee of Diana, and like her mother took as long as possible to kill her prey. I've no doubt that Smiley had equally unpleasant characteristics, but he had the tact not to flaunt them. Regardless of how much I did or didn't feed him, he also killed - rats, when he felt like a snack. He killed them quickly, usually in one movement, and ate them whole, on the spot. Again he was a more leonine type of cat, relating to the local rat population in much the same way that lions live in association with herds of their game, disturbing them only to pick off the weaklings when they're hungry. And since he usually performed such activities away from the house, I seldom saw any sign of the less attractive side of his nature. The only unfortunate characteristic he ever displayed to me was his tendency to lose his self-control, completely, in the presence of my dinner, or any dinner but his own.

But Sheba always brought her catches home, alive, and usually effectively undamaged, announcing her achievement proudly (and, being a female, possibly instinctively, to call the non-existent kittens), as loudly as whatever she was carrying would permit. If left to herself, she then took as long as possible to kill it, like her mother before her crying as if for a lost kitten when it no longer played with her, moving in response to her prods and nips. She didn't confine herself to rats, but at various times had fads for birds, frogs, lizards and black snakes, all alive-oh.

Fortunately her snake specimens were very young, and completely terrified. Snakes are like most bush creatures - they avoid you as much as possible unless you provoke them by attacking them, or persistently getting between them and where they want to go, usually home. So I was spared the choice of risking trying to kill them with one blow, provoking them if I only injured them, and removing them alive. It took time to persuade them that under the lounge-room lino was not a safe refuge, but once this was achieved they were only too willing to go into the alternative provided, receptacles to be lidded, snakes for the transport of. One poor little

wretch was so scared that it literally tied itself in a knot, and spent several horrified moments when I Returned it to Nature a very, very respectable distance from the house, trying desperately to get away into the bushes, but unable to do so until it managed to untie itself.

Needless to say, Sheba lost a large percentage of her prizes - she was relieved of anything except rats as soon as she got in the door, and, after an hour of Sheba's devoted attentions, even a rat was likely to earn my pity and intervention. At one stage I tried a barter system, giving her meat or fish in exchange for anything she handed over in good enough condition to release, but she got the idea only too quickly, and it proved too expensive. Thereafter she simply lost everything she brought in, except a dead or rapidly dying rat, and this seemed to produce a tendency to conform to those stipulations. But it didn't prevent her from leaving signs of her activities around - a corpse with a single token bite out of it, left to rot, unless her brother happened by when it was freshly killed and finished it up for her.

Sheba couldn't help putting out all the wrong signals, any more than Snoopy the right ones, but I'm only human, and her persistent campaign to be the possum and arrogate all the concomitant prerogatives couldn't help but invite comparison - and contrast.

Snoopy was always gentle with other animals - I've seen rats literally take food from under her nose, and evoke no more than a snort of disgust - and she took only the minimum measure etiquette dictates against other possums, and the cats, when they were silly enough to assume that role. Smiley endeared himself by his frankness and tolerance - there was no love lost between him and Snoopy, but peaceful co-existence was possible. But Sheba sometimes made it hard for anyone to co-exist with her. Her only virtue was that her size and temperament made her a nuisance rather than a menace to anything bigger than a rat, and her only recommendation her brother's affection for her and her own pathetic determination. From the time she was a few months old I became convinced that she was a familiar-in-search-of a witch, but I didn't know any practising witches who needed a familiar. And her foolish brother would have missed her very much.

KYLIE & BINDI

Kylie left us alone entirely in the last couple of weeks of her pregnancy, sleeping in one of her nests in her trees - which, I took no pains to discover. But a couple of days before the baby was due to make its first public appearance, she moved back into the roof over the bedroom, and started coming down on the tank-stand outside the study window to be fed in the evening. She was very obviously controlling herself, making very deliberate, non-aggressive movements in my presence.

I'd been caught by Kylie's reassurances before, and was very dubious about responding to them - whatever her intentions, she'd previously been incapable of restraining herself if I remained within critical distance for too long. But this time she really did seem to mean it: I'd put the food down and she'd let me retreat to a safe distance without moving, then applied herself to her dinner without any undue interest in me. That - showing no interest in a potential opponent - is universal possum for, `I mean you no harm - I'll just keep on with my own business if you keep on with yours.' So I approached a little closer - she was in the interesting condition where bits of baby, almost too big for the pouch, are visible one at a time - and found that indeed I came to no harm.

Coincidental learning by the baby vs.

On the night the baby was officially `born', however, when it first came on her back, something odd seemed to be going on. Kylie wouldn't eat her dinner. I tend to be a bit soft with pregnant mothers, heavily burdened by their offspring, so it was a comparatively luxurious dinner, with Kylie's own particular favourite foods featuring heavily.

deliberate teaching by the mother

But she seemed to be waiting for something, and wouldn't touch it. I tried to reassure her, to no avail, and finally turned my attention to the little one on her back, offering it an introductory finger. Like most babies on their first appearance, it was torn between timidity and curiosity, eagerly sniffing at the strange new thing one second, shrinking away from it the nest. But Mother was just sitting there placidly, so the strange new thing seemed to meet with her approval, so it finally let me stroke it gently with one finger.

As soon as I started to handle the baby, Kylie relaxed and addressed herself to her dinner. That, apparently, was what she was waiting for. I had often wondered whether babies learnt from their mothers - what to eat, where to go, how to get there - purely coincidentally because they accompanied them on their nightly round, or whether there was ever any element of deliberate teaching, with the mother, say, purposely bringing the baby to a certain place in order to show it to the baby. In this instance, given Kylie's previous and subsequent behaviour, I don't think there can be much doubt. She was bringing the new addition for introduction, and enrolment in the bread-line.

After a couple of nights, curiosity got the better of timidity, and the baby started to show a definite flare for exploration. Another girl, I named her Bindi.

She had Kylie's blunt, broad short face and ears, but, wonder of wonders, a perfect Jenny-mark, line down the centre of her snout to connect with the apex of a triangle over the nose itself. The mark occurred in quite a number of family groups in the district, but not in our vicinity, and neither her mother, Kylie, nor her grandmother, Snoopy, had that particular facial marking. She'd presumably thrown right back to her great-grandmother at Newport.[xxv] Like Snoopy and Kylie, she ultimately reached the normal size for Jenny-possums, by no means huge, but, particularly with a female, of considerable proportions.

For her the first taste of what her mother was eating did not reveal an unimagined heaven - her nose told her what her mouth was not yet able to appreciate - but, after a couple of nights, she developed a marked preference of her own, for sweet Jonathan apples and banana. Like any typical kid, of any species, it was the sweets which first caught her fancy.

But her mother took her time eating her dinner, and Bindi, having satisfied her own minute capacity, soon became bored, and turned her mind to adventure. She gradually explored everything within reach, initially venturing only a few inches away from her mother, behind the tank en route to the study window, or investigating the entertainment possibilities of my hand, but she was still only a few inches long when she first found her way in the window herself, and it wasn't very long after that that she managed to get up on to the roof by herself. I remember on one occasion retrieving her from the cats' room and returning her to her anxious parent: the cats could be trusted not to molest anything that bore a reasonable resemblance to a possum, but could hardly be held responsible if they were to attack something the size and general shape of a medium-sized rat and killed it before their sense of smell corrected the mistake, especially if it literally fell into their food-dish.

Kylie resided in the roof for most of Bindi's childhood. Apparently she found it advantageous, as she had with Shrimp, to have nests close together with an above-ground route between, for the time when the youngster, still too young for complete independence, preferred to assert her incipient adulthood by sleeping alone on the odd occasion. But she alternated between all three now available roof nests - part of the roof of the cats' room was askew after a storm, and the gabled construction meant

that there was now ample room to keep even a highly adventurous baby there, unless it was silly enough to actually fall into the cats' dish below; from a human viewpoint, the ill-fated annex had virtually been abandoned, and this, coupled with the presence of bush-rats, cats notwithstanding, meant that there was no added damage the possums could really do. Kylie also visited her tree nest (or nests) on occasion, staying there one or two nights, presumably to retain possession, and sometimes left the house before I got her dinner ready, so that she began to slip back into her former routine, coming to the house for a handout during the evening, instead of getting it before she left.

And the old problem recurred. If I left her food out for her either the rats would come and remove it before she arrived, or a cat would take up watch beside it, waiting for the aforesaid rats, neither conducive to Kylie's satisfaction. So I waited until I heard her arrive before taking her hand-out out to her. But a cautious possum, moving carefully, doesn't need to make any sound unless it wishes to, and a mother with a baby is instinctively cautious. So I didn't always hear Kylie arrive.

At first she came in the window to let me know she was there, bringing Bindi with her. But Snoopy correctly took umbrage at that - it was only a few weeks since Kylie had been persecuting her whenever she poked her nose outside, mercilessly and unceasingly - and chased her out. Hampered by the baby, Kylie didn't stop to argue. Then, one night, Bindi appeared in the window alone.

I cooed, `Oh, you dear little pet. Hallo, darling.' And gave her a piece of apple.

Snoopy said, `Ugh! Somebody Else's Baby! Yeerrch!' And when Bindi showed no signs of leaving, and I showed too many of making a fuss over her, proceeded to administer a verbal rebuke which sent the little one scampering back out the way she had come.

The penny dropped that Kylie must be somewhere nearby. I took her food outside and found her in her accustomed place on the tank stand, with Bindi behind the tank, en route back to her.

I didn't think much about it the first time, but it happened again and again. Bindi would come in alone and announce her presence, receive an appropriate greeting, and, after a reasonable interval, be sent packing by Snoopy. I would go out with Kylie's dish, and find Kylie waiting quietly in her usual place, with the baby back with her, or on the way.

Apparently Kylie knew that Bindi ran no real risk - Snoopy would only scold a baby - while she herself might expect the same treatment she was wont to mete out if she ventured into Snoopy's core territory. She may not have actually sent the baby in to get me, on the principle of throwing one's hat through the door when doubtful of the reception, but she certainly allowed her to go in, at a stage when Bindi still usually obeyed her silent call unquestioningly and could have been called back, and she certainly continued to bring Bindi each night, knowing full well what would happen.

Bindi was a very strong, robust baby, and, like her predecessor, started to assert her independence and right to personal privacy quite early, and equally vociferously, when the occasion arose. It was only a matter of weeks before she was occasionally left in sole possession of the bedroom roof nest. There was the odd panic, but not the trauma attached to Shrimp's development. Bindi was a well advanced baby, but not so disastrously precocious as her predecessor, and Kylie, too, had learnt from experience. Fortunately, Bindi found a non-lethal outlet for her spirit of adventure, exploring the roof.

The structure of the roof of the main part of the house consisted of corrugated iron, with malthoid underneath, on a wooden

framework composed of squares and rectangles. This in turn was carried on beams, with joists below, to which was attached the masonite ceiling. From a possum's point of view, therefore, the inside of the roof was divided into compartments, of different sizes but with dimensions like four feet by six feet and three to four inches high, that being the separation between ceiling and roof. It was closed from the outside on three sides, but there was a space between the corrugated iron and the top of the wall on the fourth side, facing the creek. The space was very narrow, however, since a piece of timber ran along the top of the wall, confining the opening to about two to three inches.

There were only two places where an adult possum could manage to squeeze in: on the corner of the bedroom, and over the laundry. Once inside, the possum was confined to that particular `compartment', and, luckily, in both places it happened to be compartments where the possum could do the minimum of damage, either to the roof or to itself.

Both places therefore made rather good nests: once inside, beyond the timber blocking the entrance, there was space to stretch out, sit up and groom, carefully, and change position a little during the day. The timber running along the top of the wall formed a kind of guard rail, to deter restless or adventurous babies from falling out, and at the same time provided a good defence for the nest: entry was effected only at the cost of a great deal of scrambling, and contortions, and squeezing, so that an intruder was forced to go in in such a way that its face alone would appear through the entrance first, to be dealt with by the claws of the enraged occupant. The same applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to human would-be invaders: it was possible to see a little way into the nest, and a hand could squeeze through in places, but only a hand bearing gastronomic gifts, and so sure of its reception, would risk the intrusion. The possum inside was comfortable, with the malthoid waterproofing the nest from above and giving a degree of insulation, it had space to move, and above all it was secure. Only welcome visitors need apply.

In places, there were narrow gaps between the beams and roof above, or the joists and ceiling below, and bush rats could and did go everywhere in the roof, apparently using set routes from compartment to compartment. But the gaps were too narrow for an adult possum to get through, so their activities were confined to only those two places.

Bindi, however, had the roof at her disposal when she was no larger than a sizeable adult rat, and proceeded to make the most of it. She still couldn't move with facility everywhere the rats went, but in time she worked out a way, very circuitous, very oblique, like a path through a maze in a children's puzzle, of reaching almost every section of the roof. Only the portion over the lounge, and that over the kitchen, defeated her entirely. She even managed to find another entrance, near the bathroom, where a possum up to half-grown could just squeeze through, something which stood her in good stead as a juvenile, when there was a temporary population explosion, and claimants for both other positions.

As she grew older, her personality changed. From the sound of the brawls that <u>didn't</u> have anything to do with Snoopy, she was probably having a tough time of it during her adolescence. Kylie reserved her especial hatred for me and Snoopy, but, unlike Snoopy - or for that matter Foxy or Mrs. Poss - she was not the possum to be merciful with young females visibly growing into potential rivals. Bindi became the reverse of what she had been as a baby: very timid, very shy, very nervous and jittery in my presence. Unlike her predecessors, she was never prepared to recognise me `out of context', in the bush, away from the house, perhaps partially because she saw me there only rarely during her babyhood - she of course

shared Kylie's territory upstream, whereas Snoopy, when she went out, more and more frequently went downstream, and I wasn't silly enough to encroach on Kylie's domain at night without very good reason.

But even at the house she was very, very diffident. The least provocation would send her into a panic, racing away into the darkness for the rest of the night - any sharp, or unusual, movement on my part, whether directed towards her or not. She had apparently decided to interpret anything as a sign of aggression, if there was any doubt about it all, and flee on principle. She still came for her handout with her mother on occasions, but always kept a very respectable distance between herself and Kylie, hanging around timidly in the background until she was sure all was safe. But more and more frequently she came alone, sometimes coming in the window to attract my attention if I didn't hear her, to be put out, as a matter of form and without any bloodletting, by Snoopy, if she were in, and consoled by me on the other side of the tank.

She started to time her visits for about eleven o'clock or between about half past twelve and quarter to one, the times at which she was least likely to encounter either of the other females.

Depending on which variant of their nightly routine they were using, each of the other two had a kind of temporal `windows' when they were likely to show up. When Kylie was sleeping in the roof, and got her handout when she woke up, or when she called in at the beginning of her nightly routine, on her way out to wherever she was going that night, she had come and gone by eleven. When she decided to call in at the other end of her routine, on her way home, it was usually around twelve, with a midway call sometimes around ten. So, at eleven o'clock Kylie had usually either come and gone or not yet arrived, and by one she had almost certainly come and gone, or at least gone to bed in the roof. Snoopy, when she decided to go out, usually departed around eight or nine o'clock, to return around twelve, if it were a short excursion, or much later, around three, if it were a more ambitious expedition. When she stayed in, she had usually reached the point in her routine when she was meditating in the chair in the lounge, or browsing and scuttling in the bedroom by eleven, and was in bed by one.

Neither possum's routine was inflexible, and Snoop's arrivals and departures, in particular, being rarer and so less a matter of habit, tended to be unreliable - she also had return `windows' at a eleven and one, while her inside perambulations, which had no governing factors such as the nightly walks of local dogs, or the customary presence of other possums in certain places at certain times, could pretty well depend on her mood. But Bindi's timing minimised the chance of confrontation with the pre-existent females, particularly with Kylie, who was, after all, the greater evil. Perhaps Bindi established the timing of her calls at the same time as she was developing her own most frequent nightly routines, so that they fitted into particular slots in those routines, since she still tended to keep to that timing, even after the factors which dictated it no longer applied.

Perhaps because of this timing, too, she developed a couple of comparatively unusual food-fads: leftover scraps of toast, and carrots.

Snoopy and Kylie rarely touched toast - fresh bread was considered far preferable, even when the toast had a little jam left on it as a treat. Possum attitudes to carrot vary: most will eat it, particularly if nothing else is on offer, and consider a nice, fresh tasty piece of carrot moderately enjoyable; some even develop temporary fads for it, lasting a few nights; a good many, however, are reluctant to accept it, and some won't have it at all. All the other possums I've met consider it less desirable than the alternatives, at least as far as long-term preference goes.

Certainly Snoopy usually left at least part of her carrot, preferring plain bread, apple and banana, as well as the various specials of the day, so that it was the likeliest thing to be passed on to Kylie. Kylie's opinion was much the same: carrot was all right, but she'd reject it in favour of apple or bread or orange, or, of course, banana, if any of those was on offer. At this stage Erik also got on the dinner list, by way of being an invalid. One of his problems was a vitamin A deficiency, so the choicest pieces of carrot, of medical necessity, invariably appeared in his quota. His attitude was exactly the same: carrot was edible, but everything else was preferable. With Erik as well as Snoopy temporarily getting a full dinner of new, good, for-human-consumption type food, and with the invariable possum feeding pattern of not eating all of anything, unless it was in very limited supply, there was a great deal of choice, untouched food left over to go into the dish for the non-dependent outside possums, with carrot featuring very heavily.

But there was usually plenty of everything else as well. Kylie, as next in line, had plenty to choose from before getting down to lowly carrot. Even passing, scavenging rats cleaned up first the bread, then everything else, before they took the carrot. So by the time Bindi, as last-comer, arrived, the most usual commodity left in quantity was carrot, with, less frequently, what was by now third-hand scraps of toast.

Whether Bindi developed her mania for carrot *faut de mieux*, or whether, in time, for her the prestigious handout - the element of prestige always plays a part - became synonymous with carrots, or whether she just happened to like carrot, there was no doubt that from the time she was about four or five months old she preferred carrot above all else. Given a dish with a selection of food, she made that abundantly clear.

In all ways, Bindi, the Johnny-come-lately, adapted to the existing conditions, specifically the habits of the established older females; she fitted into the vacant slot defined by those habits.

From what little I saw of her in the bush, it seems that she, too, at first went downstream, though not as far as Snoopy, frequenting the northernmost fringe of Kylie's territory. And she also seemed to be a possum closer in nature to her grandmother than her mother: like Snoopy, she was prepared to assert herself when the rules demanded it, but, unlike Kylie, she didn't deliberately go looking for fights, or indulge in imperialistic ambitions. Individuality aside, the two main preoccupations in a female possum's life are her territory and her babies: some females lean more towards one, others towards the other, and with Bindi, it was babies. It was she whom I saw later, apparently deliberately exposing herself to distract a supposed predator (me) from a cornered juvenile daughter.

ATTEMPTED ADOPTION

Snoopy, in the meantime, had failed to fall pregnant again. Given the circumstances under which her last mating with Erik took place, this wasn't particularly surprising: I suspect that those two, however suited in personality, were mutually infertile in any case. But Erik did seem to have disappeared for good in the period of Bindi's babyhood, spring 1973, and no replacement showed up - not, perhaps, through lack of trying, as a young male, apparently from a group across Mona Vale Road and a little farther towards Terrey Hills, was killed at that stage on the corner of Mona Vale and Chiltern Roads. Snoopy was still badly impeded by her foot injury, not to mention Kylie, and I couldn't risk letting her go off in search of another boyfriend. So we waited for one to arrive, but in vain.

It is not unusual for possums to miss one or two seasons - I now know, but didn't know then, that there are some similarly cut off elsewhere in the suburbs, the previous male having moved or died, and new arrivals

checked by recent clearing of land or an increase in roads or the volume of traffic. However, by this time Snoopy hadn't had a baby for over a year, and when she missed the following season, autumn 1974, as well, I started to worry about her.

I had taken her down to Newport for a few nights when she showed signs of being on heat, and various gentlemen, Joe among them, had started to make courting approaches. But Snoopy was never interested: it always seemed to be a couple of days too early, or a couple of days too late, for her, and the timing has to be just right.

At one stage, she started running around the house, calling; I couldn't find anything physically wrong with her, and she showed all the signs of a mother possum looking for her lost baby.

I made tentative enquiries at the local vet's about the possibility of adopting an orphan - sometimes the baby survives a road accident in which the mother is killed. Snoopy wouldn't be able to feed it, but, to judge from her own babyhood, if you're lucky the baby can survive the change in diet at quite an early stage. Given the manual dexterity of possums, and the degree to which Jenny co-operated with me over Snoopy, particularly in regard to putting her hands over mine to guide them when she was washing the baby, it wasn't quite in the realms of fantasy to hope that Snoopy might be able in some sense to manage one of the little doll's bottles with soft nipples. In any case she could wash the baby - and to judge from the coincidence between this, or the refusal of the baby to permit it, and the various milestones towards independence, and from the behaviour of mother and baby when, in a crisis, an older youngster temporarily regresses, this is at least as important a factor as feeding in cementing the mother-baby bond. She could carry it on her back, and show it the ropes outside - with an armoured escort if necessary - and cuddle it and pet it and sleep with it beside her. Be its mother, in fact, in all but one thing - more than Jenny, who still regarded Snoopy as her baby, had been able to do with her.

It was a fine plan, but there were some hidden flaws.

In the first place, orphaned baby possums are not exactly in copious supply - genuine ones, that is. There are often enough straying babies who have been temporarily mislaid by their mothers, and got themselves into dangerous situations. But, given the common practice of `parking' babies alone, either in the nest or in a tree, to return later, and the practice of some mothers - Honeybunch at Newport, for example - of alternating between two nests, leaving the baby alone in the one she herself does not sleep in, it is unwise to assume a baby has been abandoned or otherwise orphaned until at least the second night fails to produce its mother.

Snoopy's lost baby phase lasted only a couple of weeks, but it was months before a suitable orphan became available. By that time Snoopy no longer wanted a baby - she had found herself a partial baby substitute, just as she'd once found herself a fetish to belabour when she didn't want to attack me, and she was very contented with matters as they were.

However, events had shown by then that Erik would certainly not be returning, and having undertaken to accept any orphaned baby from the local vet I felt obliged to try. Certainly, it would have been better for Snoopy to have had a real baby of her own, rather than a baby substitute.

The timing was unfortunate in every way. It happened to be a day when I had to go out, unavoidably, for an extended period. But, remembering Joey, and that it was a matter of relative urgency that he got back to Mummy, whoever she was going to be, as soon as possible, I went and collected the baby in the morning, and took it back to the house.

Snoopy was sleeping under the bedcover, as I'd envisaged in the Great Plan, so I followed the script and slipped the baby in beside her. The idea was that Snoopy would simply wake up that evening with the baby beside her, by that time smelling at least in part of the bed and Snoopy herself, and, hopefully, assume that it was hers.

The baby was a female, younger than Joey, though not as immature as Snoopy had been. It had all the requisite features. It was still in the long, skinny rat stage, with a predominance of hair, rather than the proper fur coat. It was, however, very strong and healthy, and looked very much like a survivor. I only regretted its gender - the last thing we wanted was another Kylie on our hands. It looked, to judge from Kylie's development, roughly at the stage where it would have been spending part of the time in, and part of the time out, of the pouch in the nest, and all of it inside the pouch when mother was outside. But it was far too large to go into Snoopy's undistended pouch: she had had only one baby, by this stage the better part of three years ago, and her pouch had re-assumed its virginal state - completely flat, with just a slit in the skin, hidden by her fur, if you knew where to look.

And that was fatal flaw number two: the baby was well enough developed, and strong enough, to survive eviction, certainly inside the house, as did several of the Newport ones at a similar stage, children of particularly small mothers, or victims of circumstances, like Jenny's son Dinky, who acquired a foster-sister, but its size also precluded one of the main tactics for persuading Snoopy that it was hers.

The trick might still have worked. Hyperbole aside, I'm quite convinced that Snoopy didn't know what had happened when Kylie was actually born, i.e. emerged from the vagina and made her own way, instinctively, along Snoopy's body and into the pouch. She may even, given that relaxed, sleeping possums are very much `dead to the world', have literally slept though the whole episode - the blood loss was no more, probably less, than it would have been had she fallen prey to a leech, or even had a slight cut on some part of the anatomy that tends to bleed freely; the actual birth process, given the minute size and embryonic state of the infant, is just not comparable with than in placental mammals. If she had woken up that evening and found a baby possum that had been snuggled up against her for the best part of six hours, it is not unreasonable to suppose that she would have been no more, and no less, astonished than when she found that inexplicable little animal in her pouch.

However, fatal flaw number three: while it would usually have taken not only an atomic explosion but also a brass band playing `The Stars and Stripes Forever' actually marching up and down the bed to rouse Snoopy in the daytime, for once she was not so torpid as I could have wished. She woke up when I put the baby in beside her.

The baby, of course, looked, saw a large female possum, and said, `Mummy!' with what I could imagine was a touch of relief and delight in her peeping. But Snoopy saw Another Possum in her nest, but a baby, Somebody Else's Baby. She exhibited all the signs of anger, dismay and distress any other adult female would under the circumstances: she most assuredly didn't want it there, but she wouldn't, or perhaps couldn't, actually attack it.

She scolded and retreated, but the baby kept coming to her, clinging to her, automatically trying to climb on her back. She shook it off and retreated hastily still further. But the poor little mite, obviously distressed and bewildered, kept on following. Finally Snoopy, thoroughly disgruntled, slid over the side of the bed and into her nest underneath. I put the little one in with her, trying all the time to

reassure Snoopy vocally, hoping she would let it curl up against her. But Snoopy simply wasn't going to fall for it. She came stalking out indignantly, the baby desperately scrambling after her. I gave the baby a leg up on her back. Snoopy turned, threatened it, and shook it off.

I had to go out, so I put the electric blanket on low, and put the baby back in the bed where, worn out by her experience, she fell asleep. Snoopy retired under the bed.

When I got back later that afternoon the situation hadn't improved. I tried again to get the baby into position beside Snoopy, but Snoopy just wasn't having any. There was the same harrowing performance, the baby, sure that Snoopy was her mother, trying to act accordingly, Snoopy, fully aware that she wasn't, repeatedly rejecting it. She didn't hurt it, physically, but the rejections took their toll. The baby was at the stage where it would have slept a great deal anyway, and, worn out by distress, it spent most of the time under the bedcover, asleep, while Snoopy, ignoring it completely, went about her normal business.

At intervals, the baby would wake up, and she and I would again try to persuade Snoopy, with no success. I fed the baby, but otherwise made no attempt to `mother' it. I wanted the baby for Snoopy's sake, to be her baby. As a contingency plan, I intended to raise it myself if she absolutely refused to own it, and it should have been easy enough, under the circumstances, to malimprint it on to me. It desperately wanted its mother, and Snoopy, the only other available candidate, quite firmly insisted that she wasn't its mother. Had I kept the baby with me, and washed it, as well, it would probably have fixed on me as the only alternative. But then it would have been my baby, another thing that Snoopy had to put up with because I asked her to, and, given that the cats and Kylie were still occasional irritants, that was the last thing I wanted.

The little one took the milk from the doll's bottle quite eagerly, but there was some sign of digestive upsets, only minor at first. Joey and Snoopy had both suffered a little at first in that respect, with the change in diet, and I hoped that it would pass off.

The next day was much the same. Rather than yield possession of the bed Snoopy was back under the bedcover, but located at a strategic distance from the newcomer. Any attempt to put them together, whether initiated by me or the baby, met with the same refusal and retreat. Meanwhile, the baby's physical condition was deteriorating, and the digestive trouble worsening.

By the third evening Snoopy was showing some signs of accepting the situation. She had apparently decided that no Other Possum, particularly an animalcule of that size, was going to push her out of her chosen place, and had returned to her normal spot under the bedcover, not too close to the intruder, rebuffing approaches but otherwise assiduously oblivious of the fact that she was no longer alone. When she got up for the night, however, and the baby once more tried to attach itself, she gave it a couple of quick, rather embarrassed licks, as if undecided, before sending it about its business.

By this time, however, the baby's condition was clearly worsening: she became very lethargic, and her body temperature started to drop. I put her into the bed and turned on the electric blanket, and later got in beside her to monitor her condition, increasing the heat if she got colder, and so forth, as I had with Snoopy as a baby, but there was really nothing I could do. She died about twelve o'clock that night.

Snoopy, who was asleep under the bedcover, didn't notice a thing. When I returned from burying the body she woke up and rather sleepily proceeded up the bed to her favourite position against my back.

She sniffed around, then satisfied and gratified that the interloper had gone, went blissfully off to sleep again. It never was her baby.

The plan, I think, was not as wild as it might appear. Other arranged adoptions have `taken'. But the timing, both general and precise, was invariably wrong. If Snoopy had just lost a baby, and was still lactating, the situation would, of course, have been ideal, but this would have been a most unlikely coincidence. If she had still been in her `lost baby' phase I think it would have worked. On the other hand, if the baby had been small enough to make some show of squeezing, only partially, into her pouch, I think she would have accepted it, but its chances of survival at that stage would have been commensurately reduced. If it had been a week, or perhaps even a few days, older, still of an age where it could readily imprint on to a new mother but strong enough to make a more determined effort to cling to Snoopy in spite of her rejections, I think Snoopy would have accepted it. And finally, if the baby had survived even one more day, the situation would have altered dramatically in its favour, as Snoopy was starting to show signs, however tentative, of mothering it.

Anyway, it died. The immediate cause was possibly digestive trouble: the baby was still in the stage where its mother would have helped clean out its bowels, and at that point I didn't know the trick of rubbing its abdomen with cotton wool dipped in warm water. In the Great Plan that had been Snoopy's department. Whatever the exact truth, the baby's condition was aggravated, physically and emotionally, by the lack of a mother.

THE STORY OF ERIK

As I said, one of the reasons that I embarked on this wild scheme was that I knew Erik wouldn't be coming back that spring. He'd failed appear the previous spring, and by summer 1974 I'd virtually given him up.

But one evening late in summer I was outside giving their handouts to Kylie, now slightly less venomous of nature, and Bindi, who was developing into a shy adolescent, waiting diffidently a couple of bushes away. Across the lawn, where Erik had once so adroitly taken three steps and disappeared, there came the skeleton of a possum, with a prancing, mincing, antic gait, picking up his hind legs as if he were a puppet on a string. He came straight to my feet and collapsed.

It was Erik. If I hadn't known him so well before I would never have dreamed it was the same possum. I think you could have drawn every bone in his body by looking at him, he was hunched up to less than half his normal apparent size, and the coat was almost entirely gone from the lower part of his body, with only sparse tufts of dry red hair, some of them in the process of falling out. He was the most wretched animal I have ever seen, and I hope I never shall again.

Until then I had never handled Erik, beyond a few tentative pats, and I was apprehensive about doing so, even now. He was, after all, an adult possum, and his reaction to being picked up was unpredictable. So I sprinted back into the house for a suitably heavy cloth in which to wrap him. When I returned I found him still in the same position, apparently too weak to stir at all. I picked him up in the cloth and carried him inside. He didn't make the slightest protest.

I put him under a defunct washing-machine in the laundry. I'd presumed his lack of protest was due entirely to weakness, but I misjudged him completely. After a perfunctory inspection, and the token gesture of moving a few inches from the precise spot where someone else had put him, he settled down with obvious relief. I tried feeding him, and he took the first few mouthfuls avidly, obviously wanting more, but he was too weak to eat it. All the poor old guy had <u>wanted</u> was for someone to pick him up and

bring him in out of the cold, put him somewhere safe, and feed him.

I misjudged him in other ways, too.

It occurred to me to give him a dose of antibiotic - I still had some left from Snoopy's last misadventure - but I rejected the idea, on the grounds that I didn't know what was wrong with Erik, nor did I know enough about the drug to go handing it out indiscriminately. I tried to make him more comfortable by putting cloths around him, but every time I tried to put something round him the poor old bloke dragged himself a few inches across the floor, clear of the cloth. Apparently all he wanted was to be left alone.

So I left him. That night I quarantined the laundry - I didn't know what was wrong with him, and I didn't want to risk the others' getting it too. In the morning I took him to the vet.

Not wanting to risk an unpredictable stranger on the back of the bike, I bludged a lift from my father. I needn't have worried on that account: so far from struggling, Erik seemed too weak to move a muscle. I genuinely doubted whether he would survive the trip.

But he was still alive when we got there. The diagnosis was quite straightforward; it was certainly not contagious or infectious, but simply kidney failure, due, proximately, to a vitamin A deficiency, but ultimately, and irrevocably, to old age. The best specific, though it would treat only the secondary symptoms, was none other than the antibiotic I had refrained from giving him the previous night.

That meant a decision. I am not opposed to killing animals when there is only suffering ahead for them - on one occasion I remember `putting something out of its misery' myself when there was no alternative. I know that a lot of people think that old, sick animals should be killed as a matter of kindness - and it is indeed kindness, though sometimes the kindness is directed more towards the humans involved than the animal. Killing Erik now would certainly prevent him from suffering any more in the future.

But it would also prevent him from enjoying any more pleasure. I have no reason to believe that there is any heaven for possums: the only life they have is here and now. Killing Erik now, without letting him know the relief of his sufferings, would mean that they continued for his subjective `forever': unlike a human suicide he could not know they were about to end, and take pleasure in the anticipation.

I knew old Erik. I knew that he was tough, and courageous, and that he'd battled all his life: whatever the prognosis, the actuality would be at least a little better. And I knew that he was in love with life, more deeply and more totally than any other individual I have ever met, with the possible exception of Snoopy.

I decided to take him home and at least give him the chance to recover enough to enjoy life once more, for however short a time. He was going to suffer, certainly, but that was nothing new. The life of a male possum was assuredly `not meant to be easy'. They always seem to be carrying some injury or other disability, even if it is only the loss of their facial fur and `multiple lacerations and abrasions'. A male possum of Erik's years has learnt to ignore the aches and pains and concentrate on the things which please him.

And I knew what would please Erik - he had made that abundantly clear, as clear as Kylie. He wanted a dinner like Snoopy's.

So I took him home. It was really up to him. I could give him his medication, but he had to respond. And he had to decide what his attitude would be. If he was preoccupied with his sufferings, and crawled from day to day in a state of interminable misery, then back to the vet he

would go. But if he could ignore the distress, and concentrate not upon what he could no longer do, but upon enjoying what he could do, then at least I knew some ways of making a possum called Erik happy.

By the time I got him back to Ingleside his condition had deteriorated even further. I put him in a box in the kitchen, and poured a dose of antibiotic into him. Fortunately it's sweet, and he took it in the spirit of lime cordial.

He rallied visibly. That antibiotic is supposed to be an antibiotic and only that, but fortunately it brings symptomatic relief, about half an hour after it is administered, like aspirin in a human. Unfortunately, it is by no means as safe to dispense in small doses.

Knowing that sick animals need peace and quiet above all, I moved him, box and all, to the cats' room, and borrowed a discarded door so that I could shut the cats out. They would have to make shift in the kitchen and laundry pro tem. - since they were always trying to get into the house proper, that could hardly be considered an inordinate hardship.

However, after the temporary improvement, his condition started to deteriorate again, and continued to do so. He was unable to eat or drink, and the second dose of antibiotic had no immediate effect. I cursed the uninformed pedantry which had prevented me from giving him a dose the night before. It might just have made the difference.

By mid afternoon it was clear that the end was near. There was nothing I could do, standing there watching. Possums are basically solitary animals. I felt he deserved the dignity of dying alone.

So I sternly turned my mind to the practicalities of the situation. At the risk of bathos, I went off to borrow a shovel with which to bury him.

About twenty minutes later I returned sadly, shovel in hand, to collect the corpse. The corpse was sitting up, wading into a biscuit with lip-smacking gusto.

In a way that was Erik's answer. There were still a few more drops of enjoyment to be squeezed from life. Of course it was, at that stage, not significant. He had been sick before, and he had always recovered: there was no way in which he could conceive of any other outcome in this case; there was nothing in his experience to prepare him for the possibility of his own death.

What would be important was how he would react over a longer period, how he would cope with the suffering and disappointments of a long convalescence, and the fact that he could no longer do all he could once do. But it was typical of Erik, his personality and his attitude - and, in fact, remained so.

Choice of a nest

Erik proved to be the most active corpse, bar one, I have ever met. For the first couple of days he was too weak to move at all. But then I came in to find him down on the floor, and crawling, a couple of feet away. I retrieved him, and put him back where he came from, to his obvious displeasure.

That was the beginning, and he continued as he had begun. As he grew stronger - and at this stage his improvement was rapid and dramatic - he moved further. At first I thought that it was because he had, of necessity, fouled the box, but cleaning it up and supplying dry bedding did not satisfy him - rather the reverse. He refused to have anything to do with my cloths or other bedding I supplied, attacking it or pushing it out of the way, or hunching up miserably in the tiny corner of the box it did not cover. I persisted because, plucked as he was, he was obviously cold - it was late summer, and the nights were chilly. But he insisted on preferring the bare wood, apparently because it was reminiscent of his tree

nests. The only form of bedding he would accept was the gradual accumulation of dry, uneaten leave, which I allowed to build up for that and other reasons.

And hygiene proved a separate problem all on its own.

In the meantime the peregrinations of the corpse continued on an ever more ambitious scale. At first it was just a matter of collecting him from the floor, but then he was crawling out the door into the passage way, and taking refuge in the unfinished `closet' at the end of the hall. This had never been completed, apart from sheets of masonite to line the lower part of the wall, already pulling away from it. For the roof leaked like the proverbial sieve - it was if anything worse than if it had been open to the sky, since the corrugated iron above channelled the water down in rivulets, which tended to become miniature waterfalls in deluge-time, hard enough to hurt - and though this made little impression on the floor, which was concrete throughout the annex, the consequent damp warped and rotted the woodwork.

I didn't think this was a very good place for him to be at all, quite apart from the fact that there was method in his movements - he was heading, consistently, for the door and outside. So I collared him, and haled him, protesting, back to the box. He was obviously furious with me, and, the next time I dropped in to see how he was faring, he was back in the closet. This happened a couple of times, so I capitulated, and made him as comfortable as possible where he was, putting the box on a low chair. But once I'd interfered with his new chosen nest, he moved again, to another part of the closet.

This went on for several days: each time I found out where he was, and let him know I'd found out, he abandoned his position, with ever-increasing anger and desperation, and moved to somewhere even less suitable and even more uncomfortable, always in the general direction of out. By the time the penny dropped he was between the masonite and fibro of the farthest wall of the closet, and the only place he had left to go after that was outside.

And even then the penny dropped only because Erik hurled it crashing to the floor. Harassed, persecuted, driven beyond reason, he finally turned and charged at me, roaring. `Get-to-buggery-out-of-my-nest!' he said. I got.

It was evident from the beginning, even when I first put him in the laundry, that he was going to move a few token inches at least from wherever I put him. A possum has to choose its own nest, and the one you choose, regardless of material advantages, is by definition inferior to the one it selects for itself, regardless of its material advantages. This tied in very well with Snoopy's behaviour regarding the wood-cupboard, a perfectly splendid possum nest from the point of view of physical suitability, and her and Joey's rejection of the box we put in the tree, which other possums later found to be such a desirable residence. I put all this together only when Erik insisted on leaving the box for the closet, and reluctantly, capitulated, as I said. He refused to stay in the new box I provided in the closet, and, as he was still equally opposed to any form of bedding except leftover leaves which dried out only gradually to build up a carpet, that left him on the cold concrete floor. But it was still better than outside, where it was a matter of the cold hard ground, without any form of protection against predators, since, as I knew by this time, he was incapable of getting up even the easiest tree.

However, a second point had now emerged. I must not find his nest. Once I did that it was somehow violated, and, obviously reluctantly, he was forced to move.

Since he had naturally chosen the better places first, this meant he would inevitably move to progressively less suitable places - no wonder he was becoming angry with me. For a sick possum, even more than a well one, security is the prime requirement for a nest. Erik was physically incapable of defending himself, therefore the nest itself had to be secure enough to protect him from intruders. If I could find the nest, and from his point of view, fiddle with it, then it obviously wasn't safe, so he had to sacrifice its comparative comfort for the sake of greater security. So, almost by definition, the only good nest was the one I couldn't find.

This point had not occurred to me before. I was far more used to possums who chose nests which, though safely out of the range of dogs and protected from birds of prey, were otherwise notable for their conspicuousness, from a human point of view, hence attracting welcome attentions, such as breakfast in bed. At Newport there was Honey in the box, and Jenny and the others that sometimes camped under the eaves, while at Ingleside Kylie, when she was in the roof as opposed to the trees, made no secret of presence; she was only to pleased if I put something nearby, sparing her the necessity of going out hungry, her mind distracted by the need to eat, so increasing her vulnerability already exacerbated by the half-light and the normal sunset hubbub which drowns out the softer warning signs of an approaching predator; indeed, that may well be one reason why she got into the habit of moving back into the roof when she was in the last stages of pouch gravidity, heavily burdened by the baby and so at her most vulnerable. Erik himself took no pains to hide his location on the rare occasions he camped in the roof, presumably for similar reasons. Now, however, his increased vulnerability, as well, perhaps, as other more general factors pertaining to sick possums, made him hypersensitive on this point.

Regardless of the reason, the point was in any case abundantly clear. If I didn't stop finding his nest, he would be forced to leave entirely - he had already demonstrated that, weak as he was, it was physically impossible to confine him, given the type of structure he was in. Leaving at this stage would have proved miserably fatal. I just had to make the best of it, stretching a sheet of plastic across the closet, half way up the wall to give some degree of waterproofing, making longer term arrangements for the cats in the laundry-kitchen area, and setting up various boxes and potential alternative nests around the annex for Erik to find, by accident as it were, so that he had somewhere else to go when his present position became impossible either because of the leaking roof or because the nest became fouled.

At the same time, I had to pretend very hard that I didn't know where he was, couldn't see him at all, arranging it so that his food appeared while he was asleep, so that it had no apparent connection with me.

It wasn't just a matter of Not Seeing, a perfunctory gesture towards obliviousness. That is a real communication, whether initiated deliberately, after reflection, or as an involuntary reaction in any given case, and it depends for its effect on the fact that each possum really can see the other; I have seen a possum observing another possum unbeknownst to the second, and its attitude is quite different. It is not only pointless for a possum to Not See another possum which doesn't know it is there, it is downright dangerous: the second possum might suddenly detect the first, and, mistaking its averted gaze for genuine inadvertence, attack. What I had to do with Erik was really behave as if I didn't know he was there, and make my performance convincing - not an easy task with an animal who operates on body signals, the bulk of which are subconscious in a human.

Sanitation

Sanitation was yet another complication. At first Erik

literally couldn't move, and then he could only make a couple of expeditions of a few feet before exhausting himself. Naturally, having no other option, he fouled his nest - a possum normally tries to keep its actual nest clear, though the surrounding area can become soiled, but an immobilised possum has little choice in the matter.

At first I was only too happy to find that, despite his obvious problems, something was in proper working order, but as he began to recover the magnitude of the problem, particularly the volume of urine, started to cause real difficulties. As I said, he would tolerate no changeable bedding, other than the leftover leaves; once these built up I was able to put sheets of newspaper underneath, but both leaves and paper, and the box itself, soon became saturated. This meant I had to winkle him out of his precious nest while I cleaned it - by this time we'd got to the stage of having two boxes, one in the cats' room, the other in the closet, and I had to start changing the boxes over whenever the one he was in became soaked. But there was no way of replacing the accumulated bedding of dry leaves; we simply had to start again with fresh leaves.

For the first couple of bed-changes, Erik seemed only too grateful to have the mess removed and himself made more comfortable. At that early stage he was too sick to care about the niceties of possum propriety - the basic needs for food, shelter and protection overwhelmed everything else. But as time went on it became clear that such activities displeased him. The stronger he got - and consequently the more frequent, and more drastic, the necessary disturbances - and the more time and mental energy he had to spare from just staying alive, the greater his evident displeasure.

I remember that Snoopy had always objected whenever she found me cleaning up any of her droppings. She would emerge, whipped into a fury, from under the bed, striking repeatedly at the broom or brush, in what appeared to be a reflexive action born of uncontrollable aggression. I had to take care to keep the hand holding the brush out of the firing line, otherwise that, too, would be bitten - she didn't seem to distinguish between brush and hand, or even recognise me, *per se*, at all. At first I thought that it was simply the motion which triggered off an innate unthinking reaction - perhaps it meant something in possum terms which I couldn't guess - the lashing tail of a retreating possum which is unsure of itself? However, that was only partly true: the same motion of a brush or broom, in a different context, produced a reaction, but the real blind rage seemed to be consistently reserved for the removal of her waste products. The only thing which infuriated her more was the removal of the dried white scent trails.

I hadn't pondered the subject very deeply, since the problem with Snoopy was pretty minimal, and the incidents comparatively rare. Although she frequently didn't, of her own volition, leave the house, it was seldom that she didn't get at least as far as sitting on the window sill; in any case I knew the places around the house where she spent most of her time inside, meditating, eating, scuttling, whatever, and so where the main problem was likely to occur, and anticipated by putting down lino remnants or other such coverings which could easily be cleaned. I just confined my cleaning activities to the hours when she was safely torpid.

Now, with Erik starting to show signs of the same behaviour, it seemed to make sense. Body waste, solid or liquid, plays little or no part in the marking of territory or possessions, as it does with a dog,[xxvi] but it would, presumably, nevertheless carry the personal smell of the possum concerned. As I said, Erik, sick and physically vulnerable, required security above all, as soon as the immediate problems of food and cold had

been solved, this time not so much physical inviolability of the nest but the mental security of knowing that he was in his own nest. Of course he wasn't in his own nest. He hadn't been there long enough for his personal smell to permeate the wood as it would normally do. In removing the waste products I was removing his precious personal scent, reducing the box to a strange, unfamiliar place, fraught with unknown dangers, once again.

Even when I realised this, I still had to clean up the mess as times. Erik was obviously uncomfortable in it, for like most possums he was fastidious about personal cleanliness, and it was only the overriding importance of the emotional security that prompted his objections. Apart from which, he simply couldn't be left in a box swimming in his own urine - even when he wasn't minded to move on principle, this sent him crawling out, crying with distress at having to leave the safety of his nest. Nevertheless, I was now prepared to compromise on hygiene, even if it slightly exacerbated the medical problem. It obviously meant so much to him that the fretting and the physical exertion it engendered were themselves having a visibly deleterious effect on him. I cleaned up only when absolutely necessary, instead of making it a routine chore, done regularly on principle. And when drastic alterations were needed, I replaced the driest sprig of soiled leaves to ensure continuity of smell.

That mitigated the problem but, of course, it didn't solve it. There is no complete solution to a problem where two equally important factors exert diametrically opposed, irreconcilable claims, precisely the sort of problems which always seem to arise with sick possums.

Perversity on principle

While there turned out to be good and adequate possum reasons for these two apparent aberrations on Erik's part, in other ways - in almost every other way - he was contrary as a matter of principle, without any imaginable reason, possum or otherwise.

This came out most clearly in his attitude to the food I offered, and, in particular, medication. There was no trouble at first - he was so hungry that he would eat anything I put in front of him, until, after a few minutes, he became too exhausted to continue; he was that weak. But once the edge had been taken off his hunger, he reverted to behaving like a normal possum, picking and choosing a little of this, and a little of that, developing fads which lasted a few days, then gradually waned, until, when offered something that had been Absolutely Delicious a week before, he behaved as if I were offering him a red-back spider. This coincided with the normal feeding patterns I'd seen in Snoopy and the others, including Erik himself.

However, he went beyond this. One of the things the vet had said was that a basic problem was a vitamin A deficiency - though beyond that it was simply old age. Although there was no real hope of long-term recovery, I felt I ought to at least try to do something about it. There was no point in planning for the distant future, denying him food he liked because it would make his teeth drop out, or cause hardening of the arteries, in five years time. There wasn't going to be any five years time, for him. But Erik was one of those characters you don't give up on until you bury them; next year might well be a different matter. The best, possum-edible source of vitamin A is carrot.

Ironically, it was what I gave him the night he turned up, since, by some unprecedented fluke, I happened to have run out of softer, more suitable foods. To the best of his very limited physical capacity, he'd wolfed it, and for the next few days had eaten it, along with anything else I chose to offer, with alacrity. But then he began to leave the carrot. I thought at first that this was just a normal food fad pattern - as I said earlier, carrot, though certainly edible, is a less preferred food

with most possums I've met, save only the odd eccentric like Bindi, or a possum with a temporary fad for it.

Suspecting that it might be too hard for him to manage in his weakened state, I tried grating it, dicing it, carrot juice, even cooked and canned carrot. He might, at most, taste it in each new form, in case it was something new and interesting, then reject it. All right, Erik was simply over his carrot kick. So I tried the alternatives. There aren't, as it happens, very many, though I remember trying chopped liver: possums aren't particularly strict vegetarians. No result.

So I tried crushing up cat condition tablets (all after consulting the vet, to make sure it would do no immediate harm) and disguising the crumbs by putting them along the seed-line of a split piece of banana, or in a teaspoon full of soft-boiled egg, something Erik had shown himself partial to. Certainly, those tablets have a very pungent odour when crushed, and presumably also a very strong taste, but some of the camouflages seemed to work at first, in that he ate the doctored portion along with undoctored servings of the same food. But, since normal feeding patterns dictate that a possum should not eat all of anything, it is necessary to offer more than you know the possum is going to eat, in order not to add to the already severe behavioural tensions imposed by the other aspects of confinement, and, inevitably, it would start to happen, apparently just by chance, that the vital bit would be left aside. When this happened, naturally, I would pick up the vital piece and offer it to him, drawing his attention to it. Which invariably ensured its rejection.

I tried sedulously ignoring the crucial piece, though naturally I kept a covert eye on proceedings, anxious that he should get his dosage. That worked when it worked, but, as I said, it is extremely difficult to fool an animal that normally operates on mute body signals. He had only to get an inkling that I was interested in his eating a particular morsel, and that was the end of it. No power on earth could induce him to take it.

I tried giving him only the piece with the condition tablet, and refusing to give him the rest of his dinner until he ate it. It didn't work. Anything resembling coercion only strengthened his resolve. He stubbornly refused to eat it, and, if it was a bluff, he could outbluff me every time. I am sure that it is possible for a possum in this situation to literally curl up and die if too distressed, and it really was only Erik's will to live that was keeping him going at this stage. But, more mundanely and beyond that, he was so emaciated and so starved that every meal he ate made a visible difference to his condition. At the same time, he had absolutely no reserves. A missed meal will affect a well possum no more adversely than it will a fit human, but Erik was so near the edge that there was no way of knowing how seriously he might suffer. I simply couldn't take the risk. The food itself was of far more immediate importance than any long-term attempt to correct a vitamin deficiency. He had me every time.

The same thing happened with the main medication, the antibiotic. It comes in the form of a sweet liquid, beloved by possums, and usually the only problem is to keep them away from the bottle, to prevent an overdose. Erik loved it at first, and there seemed at least three fail-safe mediums for instilling it into him when the fad wore off, if it did: banana, biscuits, and his supreme favourite, warm milk and bunloaf. Nevertheless, in due course, about the time he was getting ideas about the vitamin powder, they too failed, in the same manner. I ended up forcing it on him by squirting it in the general direction of his mouth, so that what missed went on his snout, and he, perforce, had to lick it off; a possum finds a sticky face just as intolerable as a cat does. So he licked it off, sullenly at first, obviously resenting being made to do something, then with increasing,

insuppressible, relish as he got the taste of it - something Absolutely Delicious.

Clearly, he still adored it, and, all things being equal, would have taken it with gusto. It was just the principle, the fact that I wanted him to do it, that was proving an obstruction.

I suspect that what was going on may have been something like this. Possums are thinking animals, with some power to override their innate behaviour patterns, or modify them, when circumstances demand. In other words, they make their own decisions. In such animals it seems likely that the capacity to make their own decisions has itself become a survival factor. Erik, when he was well, could afford to ignore any social peccadilloes on my part - he was an amiable, complaisant old chap, amenable to any suggestion that wasn't too outrageous, for, despite appearances, many possums by nature try to avoid conflict rather than provoke it. Now, however, sick and vulnerable, he was bound to resist any infringement of his prerogative to make his own decisions, since it constituted yet another erosion of his already depleted store of survival mechanisms.[u]

Be that as it may, there was in any case a more prosaic reason for his increasing irascibility and fretfulness. Like a human patient, at first he was too sick to care about anything except the relief of his most immediate problems: once this was managed, he just slept. But, again like a human patient, his mind recovered faster than his body, he became restive, trying to do things and finding he couldn't, conscious for longer periods and obviously irritated and frustrated by his situation. He was bored.

It's hard enough to devise amusements for a human patient; for a possum it was darn near impossible. There was only one thing I could dream up that proved in any way beneficial, satisfactory or even tolerable, rather than just annoying him further.

Erik's coat, and the skin beneath what was left of it, was in a shocking condition. He had lost most of his fur from the shoulders down, and the skin was hard and scabby, flaking off in lumps and crumbs. If he'd been a dog, he would have had mange: that was why I had been so careful to quarantine him the first night, until I found that it wasn't contagious.

No doubt the initial cause of the skin trouble lay with the disease, but it was certainly exacerbated by the same vicious circle which sick possums almost invariably get into, regardless of what is wrong with them. The first part affected always seems to be the back legs, which provide not only the main motive power for their long-distance ground gait, but also the thrust necessary for going up trees. Without that sort of mobility, it is almost always impossible for them to forage effectively. From the start, therefore, they are getting less than adequate food, becoming progressively weaker, and even less capable of feeding themselves, until they are effectively immobilised, confined to the nest or whatever temporary shelter they found when the worst of the debility struck. At this point, failing outside interference, they either do or they don't. Either they die, or the enforced rest revives them sufficiently to start unwinding the spiral.

Their grooming suffers *pari passu*. Normally extremely fastidious about their coat, they are unable to keep it in good condition once illness strikes, because once again it is the hind legs which are crucial to the operation. Furthermore, as they become weaker, what energy they have is progressively reserved more and more for trying to get food.

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u. I do not, of course, mean to imply that he was conscious of this himself, any more than humans are normally conscious of why they are irritable, or sensitive on certain points.

Presumably they are normally so particular about grooming both because their coat is vital to them and because they are also prone to skin infections and irritations. When trouble starts under these circumstances, be it as symptoms of the disease or coincidentally, it spreads rapidly, unchecked, as the possum is in no position to do anything about it.

As soon as Erik was no longer on the verge of death by starvation - that is to say, he was unlikely to die in the next couple of hours - he set about trying to remedy the situation. But the task was wholly beyond him. He was so weak, and his movements so limited, that it was like a tiny baby possum trying to groom a full-grown adult. So I decided to lend a hand.

At first, not wanting to hurt him by pulling a comb through snags, I tried brushing him with a soft brush before combing him. That was obviously wrong. He was more likely to strike reflexively at the brush than show his appreciation. A strange hairy object in contact with its person is not the most reassuring of things to a sick, immobilised possum.

The comb was different. Its hard teeth approximated very well his own built-in comb, his grooming claws. In addition to causing him distress through cold and abrasions through absence of fur, it was evident that the `mangy' areas were itchy, and the comb scratched in what was obviously a very satisfying manner. Erik thought it was lovely. He wriggled with pleasure under the comb like a baby possum snuggling up to its mother. Ooh, that felt good.

For about ten minutes per day. If I persisted beyond that, trying to achieve a real systematic improvement in the state of his skin rather than just amusing him, it became pestering, like everything else.

The dilemma with sick possums

There was a real dilemma. From the point of view of his general well-being, I should ideally have left him strictly alone, tactfully placing his food just outside whatever constituted his current nest while he was asleep, visiting him, to his knowledge, only once a day, briefly, to comb him until he was tired of it, as a break in the monotony.

On the other hand, there were medical imperatives equally as vital. He had to have his medicine, more or less on time. As I mentioned before, the antibiotic in question, though intended as no more than that, does have a symptomatic effect, palpably obvious somewhere between half an hour and an hour after administration. Conversely, omission of a dose in a situation like this produces a dramatic, and rapid, deterioration. The effect on Erik, when I relented in the face of the obvious distress my insistence was causing, was so alarming that I dared not do it again. The only justification for putting him through all this was that I was endeavouring to get him back to a state where he could once more enjoy his normal life. If I gave up half way, then I had added to his misery for no purpose at all, other than the selfish one of keeping my old friend around me a little longer.

Giving him the medicine entailed doing all the things most calculated to reduce a helpless, immobilised possum to a state of nervous collapse. I had to invade the sanctity of his nest; as he became more and more contrasuggestive, and more and more awake to my attempts at guile, I had to invade the sanctity of his person as well, grabbing him and holding him as still as I could while squirting the liquid in the general direction of his mouth. Then, too, he couldn't be left awash in his own urine; that would propel him out of the box, and out into the unknown, just as certainly as pestering him, and rectification of that situation involved a drastic and distressing upheaval.

Above all, as I will explain, he wanted to go out, to try to resume his routine three-day patrol of his territory. This, given his

physical capability at the time, was quite out of the question. However, his efforts in this direction led to his discovery of something I'd previously managed to conceal. While he was free to wander in and out of the cats' room and up and down the hall, all he had in fact been capable of until then, he now knew that the outer door was shut: he was caged.

That alone is enough to drive any animal frantic; from there on he became obsessed by the outer door, making a bee-line for it whenever he moved, always hopeful, always to have his worst suspicions confirmed and his desperate fury reinforced. A cage is very much a state of mind: he didn't in fact need any more space than he had, but once he knew he didn't have the option of going further, the whole room seemed to shrink and vanish, leaving only the closed door.

Furthermore, from Erik's point of view, it didn't matter how much space he had: it was the wrong space. It was not his territory, which he ought to be patrolling, protecting from intrusion.

It seemed inevitable that if I continued in this manner I was going to lose Erik's trust and affection. He was sick and vulnerable, and what did I do? I caged him, and once I had him at my mercy, proceeded to abuse him by inventing progressively more sophisticated refinements of torture in the way of plaguing him, violating his nest and person, pestering him with insistent demands to perform pointless actions. Between Erik and myself a degree of basic communication was possible, but there was no way in which I could say, `Erik, if you take this medicine now, and keep taking it, you will feel a lot better in a week's time.' And there was no way in which he could have comprehended, even if I could have told him. Possums, Erik above all, are quick to understand a situation if they can see that there are advantages for them in compliance, but there was no way in which I could make <u>this</u> situation comprehensible in possum terms.

To him, it could only be gratuitous sadism, or at best misguided imbecility. He became progressively more and more furious with me. The crises were most frequent when I ignored his injunctions to remove my offending presence from his nest and continued to force his medicine on him. He threatened repeatedly, then made incipient charges at me, warned me with sharp nips, then finally, when I blithely ignored all his warnings, bit me indeed.

Even then, it was more of a nip than a bite. That this was a function of his self-restraint rather than his physical weakness was shown by the fact that around the same time he demonstrated just what he could do on far more solid material than my hand: in twenty minutes flat he demolished enough of the wooden door to allow him to squeeze through, in his efforts to escape. The worst he ever did to me was to just break the skin and draw a little blood, to show that he meant what he said. It hardly hurt at all.

What hurt a lot more was the misery and bewilderment that was written all over his body while he did it. Every part of his being made it clear that he hated doing it. Erik didn't want to bite me. Poor old Erik <u>liked</u> me. The last thing he wanted was to have to attack me. Why did I keep forcing him to do so?

It seemed obvious that if I continued, Erik was going to hate me before he was fit enough to be spared my unwelcome attentions. I did not want to lose Erik's friendship, but it seemed that I was going to have to. If that was the price of his recovery, so be it.

For Erik was improving all the time. It was a matter of two steps forward and one step back, a pattern I've seen in every other sick possum I've had to deal with since. After panicking the first couple of times, I realised this. His overall improvement, given this framework, was

rapid and dramatic.

And it was also clear that in one respect I had not been mistaken about Erik: his approach to the situation. Even in the extremity of wretchedness he managed to achieve moments of seventh heaven. When he hadn't soiled his current nest, when I wasn't pestering him with senseless demands, and when the inner commands to get up and go somewhere had been satisfied,[v] he felt at liberty to lie back and enjoy the comforts of his situation, especially the food.

Food

At first he'd been so weak that I'd reverted to the invalid diet I'd used on Snoopy as a baby, soft boiled egg, banana, warm sweetened milk, and so forth. I'd wanted, however, to get as much solid food as possible into him as quickly as possible, and I'd hit on the idea of giving him bread soaked in his milk, like the breakfast dish of days of yore. That proved a great success.

Whenever he had got into the house previously, he'd made it abundantly clear what he wanted: Snoopy's dinner. So as soon as he was up it, I provided him with a replica.

At first, everything was Absolutely Delicious, and he was in possum heaven. But it soon became clear that within that range, all of which was initially Absolutely Delicious, he had definite preferences, and they were not the same as Snoopy's. I had expected that: all possums have their idiosyncratic fads; Joey's, for example, were quite different from Snoopy's. Erik first showed his tastes by diving on selected morsels first, leaving the less desirable items until last. Then, as his ravenous hunger abated, he began to leave them, full stop. I started experimenting with all the other varieties of human food I'd ever known a possum to be partial to, with mixed success. Some things were Absolutely Delicious, others were considered inedible. Unfortunately, like those of all possums, most of his fads were evanescent. What was Absolutely Delicious one day became an everyday right, not a special treat, a few days later. In a week's time it was too commonplace to bother about, left till last, or rejected entirely in favour of the latest infatuation.

I was kept very busy inventing new delicacies, or gauging the moment to re-introduce old loves, in order to ensure that there were at least a couple of thing that were Absolutely Delicious in each meal.

It turned out that he had only one abiding fancy. I tried substituting a piece of bun-loaf (raisin bread) for one of the slices of bread in the milk. His reaction was the same as when I first set out a full Snoopy-type dinner in front of him. He couldn't believe his nose. He'd never even dreamt that such food could exist. But after a couple of days, although I may have imagined it, I seemed to detect a touch of reproach creeping into his amazement. Such food existed in the world, and it had been kept from him. Why? Nevertheless, bun-loaf and milk was, and remained, Absolutely Delicious.

After such a reception I decided to see if Snoopy, too, might like the occasional piece of bun-loaf as a treat. She sniffed it suspiciously, tasted it doubtfully, then refused to have any more to do with it. When I offered it on subsequent occasions, she took it as an insult. The same applied to any other sweet treats I dreamed up for Erik; she was more likely to take to a savoury novelty, such as spinach, which Erik, of

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v. Either by a short walk under my supervision, or by a genuine attempt to get out, physically frustrated by me; at the beginning his attitude to the subject was decidedly mixed - he knew he ought to go, but it was uncomfortable, painful and dangerous, and once he'd `done his duty' by trying, that seemed to be a sufficient sop to his conscience. See below.

course, rejected.

She benefitted only indirectly from my efforts to keep Erik in gastronomic ecstasy, as it eventuated, by way of what he declined. In the vitamin A crisis I tried, having unsuccessfully offered everything I knew to contain the necessary, anything I thought might possibly do so, including sweet corn, no doubt as a result of the propaganda on breakfast cereal packets. I myself am so far from regarding corn-on-the-cob as edible that it had never previously occurred to me to buy it as a treat for the animals. It have never entered the house before, so no one had a chance of knowing whether he liked it or not. Erik, predictably, nibbled a couple of grains without enthusiasm, on the first couple of occasions it was served, and thereafter disdained to acknowledge its presence. Snoopy, however, considered it highly delectable, and it became a favourite semi-regular treat.

Erik was equally pernickety, and, from my point of view, equally perverse, in his choice of leaves. I knew, of course, what Snoopy preferred - I kept a fresh supply in various vases and containers, distributed around the house, so that Snoopy didn't have to go out and face up to the cold hard world, specifically the ice-and-iron maiden, Kylie, if she were disinclined to do so. I knew from observation that Kylie's own selection was very similar - naturally, since her basic tastes were formed while she shared her mother's territory and food supply, as a dependent youngster. While I knew that there were differences from possum to possum, it hadn't really penetrated that the discrepancy could be as great as it was in their quirks regarding human food.

So I started, as with the human menu, by offering Erik the same array as Snoopy usually received - at least I could be sure that it wasn't poison. Erik's reaction was much the same, too. It later eventuated that he had been subsisting on what he could reach from the ground, grasses, and the tender, but by no means substantial leaves of the few very young seedlings. At first he was just overjoyed to have <u>real</u> food within his reach again.

However, it soon became clear that his preferences were almost completely at odds with those of the girls, firstly through the priorities he awarded to the various varieties in the wholly edible range I offered, then through direct demonstration, when he recovered enough to stagger a few yards outside, with me in attendance, and nibbled at what he could reach from the ground. When this penetrated, I got into the habit of bringing home pieces of any likely sort of vegetation and offering them to him, with some egregious successes, and so gradually got to know his tastes.

One of his great delights was the common local type of wattle. He ate the leaves, but was particularly partial to the flowers. I tried offering some to Snoopy, and she wanted no part of it - leaves, flowers, stalk, or whatever. One of my successful experiments was lemon scented gum. Unfortunately I could locate only one very small sapling, and so took only very small sprig home to Erik. He devoured it whole, with great avidity. So, on my second visit, after misgivings, I took two sprigs, and proudly presented one to Snoopy. She received it, to put it in the kindest way, with tepid ardour: it was all right for a change, but not worth more than a few nibbles.

Erik was partial to flowers in general - perhaps a reflection of his marked `sweet tooth' - so when I found an unseasonable gum blossom on a fallen sapling I scavenged that too and offered it to him. He was sure Christmas had really come this time. Obviously, gum blossoms would be a rare treat under ordinary circumstances, since gum trees seldom locate their flowers conveniently within reach of branches strong enough to bear the

weight of an adult possum. And I was delighted when I later found two more flowers, and could include one in Snoopy's selection of leaves. She stared at me in puzzlement, as if I had, for some arcane reason, included a door-knob in her dinner.

Even their taste in gum leaves was different. Snoopy and Kylie preferred the leaves from the large, rough-bark bluegums, considering red-gum only just edible, except for the tender young tips. Erik said both were edible, but what he really had a yen for was scribbly-bark, which grew amongst the sparser vegetation further from the creek - an area seldom visited by the girls, but as I later discovered part of his regular territory. Snoopy said scribbly-bark was all right for a change, but, whereas Erik preferred the young shoots and smaller leaves at the tip, Snoopy, when she deigned to eat it, preferred the older, tougher, more fibrous leaves from lower down. And so on. Even when they did consent to eat the same varieties of gum, they preferred leaves from different trees. Apparently, to a possum's educated palate, the leaves of two different trees are no more identical in taste than are similar types of wine from different vineyards to an oenophile.

They really were a most perplexing pair.

Nevertheless, the pleasure Erik took in his food and personal comfort, together with his dramatic physical improvement, encouraged me to keep going, leaving him alone as much as possible, but insisting on giving him his medicine and making sure his current nest wasn't completely awash. I tried to minimise the disruption by guile, using every ploy I could think of to get as much as necessary of his co-operation without letting him know that I was in any way directing his actions. But Erik was very quick to spot a ruse, and once he knew it for what it was, indirect dictation, that was the end of it. It turned into a contest in mental gymnastics. Some tricks worked the first time, but nothing ever worked twice.

Gradually, one way or another, we sorted out the problems, and came to some compromise arrangement on points of disagreement. It might have happened sooner, had we been left alone to work it out between us. But after the first couple of nights, Erik had visitors.

The first to arrive, needless to say, was Kylie. She came trotting across the roof of the cats' room, headed for the window, in search of her handout, just after Erik had shifted from the room proper to the closet at the end of the hall. Erik pricked up his ears, looked up, and called her most plaintively.

I do not know whether he was saying, `Come on, darling,' or `Help! I am being held prisoner in a Chinese fortune cookie factory!', but in either case he had no intention of making good on his words. Even as he called, he snuggled further down into his luxurious bed of dry leaves. He really was a frightful liar.

His performance reminded me a great deal of our old dog at Newport, Sparkey, who protected the cats and chooks on the property, and distinguished himself by falling in love, at various times, with a couple of hens and a rabbit, but nevertheless mistook young Joey for a rat - and lived to suffer the indignity of having the aforesaid rat climbing on his back and swinging on his tail. Sparkey was always a ladies' man, and if, in his prime, we refused to let him out when it was evident that he wanted to go a-courting, he would set up a high-pitched whine, gradually working himself literally into hysterics, like a child in a wilful tantrum. Funny, but when it continued all night and was still going the next day, so that you became seriously concerned for your dog, not so funny. Particularly since he was otherwise such a good, intelligent dog, amenable to any reasonable request, and it was evident that he really couldn't help it. Instinct just asserted

itself too strongly. In the end we usually capitulated.

However, when he got old - he lived to sixteen and a half - he began to find the whole business a bit wearing. Staying out in the rain, mounting vigil outside his lady love's place of confinement, remaining there, fighting off all the other, larger dogs in the neighbourhood, obliged to stay without food for two or three days before going home even briefly, in case her owners relented - that sort of thing is all right for a young dog, but when he got old, and rheumaticky, he found it too much like hard work.

He still whinged to go out at the appropriate time, but if we said, No, and firmly shut the door, he would give one whine of protest, then flop down on the floor, and go peacefully to sleep. Apparently `duty' demanded that he should make an effort, and put up a token show of protest when we refused to let him go, but at the same time his relief was evident. Our rebuttal gave him an excuse to avoid an arduous duty, and he could stay where he was comfortable with a clear conscience.

Erik was just like that. In both cases it was obviously a face-saving gesture. I cannot, of course, prove that either animal was aware of the ambiguity of his behaviour, that it was not just an involuntary mixed reaction, but my impression at the time was that Erik knew exactly what he was doing. As far as I was concerned, he was an old fraud.

Nevertheless, it gave me an idea. I thought that perhaps Erik might be reassured by the sight of a female possum, particularly one of a gentler cast of mind, so I went and collared a rather unwilling Snoopy, and carried her through to the annex in my arms.

Erik saw us from the end of the hall. And he screamed. It wasn't just the half-frightened hiss of a possum sensing an intruder in its nest, it was a real scream, a cry of the last extremity, like Snoopy's screams the night she fell out of the tree and lay stiff on the ground on her back, with Erik above.

The last thing sick, immobilised, vulnerable old Erik really wanted was the proximity of an adult female. Calling plaintively to his dream girl, when, to the best of his knowledge, there was no chance of her coming, was one thing; the actuality was a completely different matter.

So I retreated, with a by now thoroughly flustered Snoopy.

Later visitations, however, were harder to dispel. While Kylie did not answer his invitation, she apparently took a rain check. I think it was the next night that I heard the screams and went into the annex to rescue Erik, trapped between the masonite and wall of the closet.

It was inevitable. Erik had a desirable nest, with special food, and Kylie's nose could hardly fail to tell her so. Normally, if Erik had anything Kylie wanted, he would have yielded it up immediately, and departed with the utmost celerity. But now he was immobilised, and the position was just the same as it would have been with any other sick possum: once Kylie had been attracted by the smell, and the fight had started, his physical proximity served as an added and continuing incitement, and he was unable to remove the offending presence.

Kylie was somewhat taken aback, not to say astounded, by my intervention. Of late, relations had been rather more amicable. Yet here was another weak possum in possession of something which she wanted, which, according to the rules, she, as the unquestioned dominant, was therefore entitled to take, and I was protecting him! I protected Snoopy, she knew. She was more or less resigned to that, and it was quite explicable. I was, after all, Snoopy's mother, wasn't I? But she couldn't see how I could be Erik's mother.

The next time she came back, by accident or design, she managed

to position herself between Erik and me, so that I couldn't intercept her. Given her previous expertise in guerrilla tactics, I suspect that it was by design.

I tried to keep her out by putting chicken wire all over the gaps above the doors to the outside - they were paling, garden type doors, and so left spaces between the points of the staves - and over the gap between the roof and the wall in the unfinished, unceilinged closet. Kylie must have thought it was a joke. It was a matter of a few seconds' work to widen one of the gaps in the mesh by breaking the wire between it and the nest, or pull the wire away from the nails around the edge.

There was simply no practical way of possum-proofing the place, let alone Kylie-proofing it.

I know very well that there are no deep-dyed, infernally black villains, but there are moments when it is necessary to act as if the world were constructed upon the adversary principle. And Kylie precipitated more of those moments than anyone else I have met.

Nevertheless, I could see her point, and was not without a certain degree of sympathy. According to the rules, she was right and I was wrong. I tried to divert her with special food, and avoid confrontations where possible. Her sorties continued, but they were milder than her previous attacks on Snoopy, lacking the vehemence of the daughter-mother rivalry. She seemed almost resigned, inured to the injustice. After a while they petered out, for an eminently practical reason.

Kylie was once again heavily pregnant. Possums in that condition try to avoid fights - earlier, they are excessively aggressive, and if all goes according to plan they will have established and secured a suitable nest and core territory by this stage, when they are physically encumbered by the grotesquely enlarged, sagging pouch, and their movements become clumsy, and what's in the pouch has definitely ceased to be part of the pouch itself, or a strange intrusive little animal, and has become the baby, to be protected. Towards the end of autumn, Kylie produced a baby which seemed to bear a resemblance, illusory or otherwise, to Erik. I named it Rikki, more in hope than in belief.

Erik must have been sick for months before he returned to the house, but I do not know where he was, or what his condition was, at the critical time. So it was at least possible. Rikki was an extremely shy, nervous youngster, of whom I saw very little at close quarters. I never indisputably established whether Rikki was a he or a she, but my impression was that he was a boy.

During the first couple of weeks Erik invariably exhausted himself, one way or another, then collapsed, sleeping in whatever his current nest was for the rest of the night. He was once again in the closet, completely exhausted and vulnerable, when his third visitor appeared on the roof. A mature male, in his prime, with face-markings that were entirely strange to me.

Erik's replacement had arrived.

He seemed like the sudden, physical embodiment of something I knew, but tried not to think about too often.

Feeble, tired old Erik raised himself on his forepaws, and gave one, magnificent roar.

And I added my voice, pleading, to his. Not yet, not yet! Go away, you're too soon, go away and come back when it's all over!

This unorthodox combination seemed to convince the newcomer, and he went. Like Prince Hal in *Henry the Fourth*, his attempt to inherit the crown was premature. He vanished as completely as if he had been a spectral omen, for the next few weeks.

These intrusions did nothing if not whet Erik's already keen determination to leave. One of the palings of the outer door in the passage had a few inches missing at the bottom, and this had become a kind of *de facto* cat door; when I wanted to keep them in for some reason, I blocked the hole with bricks. I discovered the hard way that Smiley could push one brick straight back out; even two bricks, the second behind and athwart the first, proved no real obstacle; but three bricks, arranged in a kind of eccentric form of dry-stone walling, kept him in.

I had blocked it up from the beginning, in the established manner, not so much, initially, to keep Erik in as to keep the cats from automatically going into their lair and disturbing him. Erik made a bee-line for the hole as soon as he started crawling to the door. And he proceeded methodically to undo the combination of bricks which had kept Smiley baffled for weeks. He didn't even really seem to have to think very much about it.

Smiley must have been lurking around somewhere watching, because suddenly, miraculously, he too had no difficulty with that combination. It's unprovable, but a fair presumption, that he learnt, if not the precise method at least that it could be done, and the general way of approaching the task, from the possum. Erik was the pioneer; Smiley followed after.

That's the nearest thing I've seen to a comparative intelligence test between a cat and a possum, for what it is worth. It was, of course, grossly unfair to the cat. In the first place, manual dexterity, and finding their way in and out of things, is a special speciality of possums. Their front paws are genuine hands.[w] Because of this physical dexterity, which allows them to perform such actions readily and frequently, they are also more practised in the concomitant mental processes. Smiley wasn't in Erik's class, because he didn't even go to the same school.

Then, too, it was an old, very wise, very experienced possum against a half-grown cat, a youngster of around 18 months. I imagine that if the same thing had occurred later, the disparity would still be there, but it would not be as great. And, finally, since one is trying to rate the possum by the cat, and cats vary so greatly, it is necessary to get some idea of the intelligence of the cat in question: according to his biased owner, he was an intelligent, rather than unintelligent, cat, certainly light years beyond his `twin' sister; I have, however, had a reasonable amount of experience with no more than twelve individual cats. And Smiley certainly seemed to have a particular aptitude for precisely this sort of thing. He had unusually wide separation between the digits of his forepaws, and, possibly because his association with possums had given him ideas in that direction, tried to use them as hands more frequently than most. Not in the same league as Erik, of course, but not bad for a cat.

So I increased the number of bricks, positioning them at angles to each other, to the best of my ability so as to arrange the force lines to combine in blocking the hole. Always Erik systematically demolished the structure, in near enough to reverse order of construction.

Poor old Erik was at one and the same time too intelligent, and not intelligent enough. He was too bright for any of my attempts to keep him in to succeed, but not bright enough to comprehend why he shouldn't go.

I hated to see him wearing himself out against my barricades, only to have me put up more, even stronger barricades when he succeeded, and I hated to see him caged against his will, so, from the time of his first determined effort in the three-brick stage, I tried taking him out for a

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w. See above, p. 35 f. and Note xii.

walk each night, under my supervision, as I did with the convalescent Snoopy.

There was no possibility of his using the normal bounding gait. He walked, or rather staggered, then crawled, then dragged himself across the ground with his front paws only, then finally collapsed, unable even to move towards makeshift cover a couple of feet away. In all, he got about fifty feet from the house.

On the way he tried to feed, doggedly trying to resume his normal routine, a ghastly travesty of a possum going about its daily business. He couldn't climb anything at all, of course - at the very best he could choose a sapling with a trunk thin enough to fit into his hands, and try to go up arm over arm, his hind legs hanging uselessly, managing perhaps two such movements before he fell off. All he could eat was what he could reach from the ground, ferns, and the tender, but hardly nourishing, leaves of seedlings small enough for him to reach.

Compared with human food such as bread and fruit, leaves, any leaves, do not seem to have much concentrated food value. A possum has to go through a comparatively large bulk of leaves each night to extract enough nourishment. There was no way in the world that Erik, once grounded, could get sufficient food.

It is all too easy to picture what happened: Erik, falling ill somewhere in the farther reaches of his territory, grounded and gradually starving to death, each night growing weaker, each night able to reach less food than the previous night, finally remembering a place where there had always been plenty of food, actually given to him without much effort on his part, food that stopped him feeling hungry more quickly.

He must have dragged himself across the ground like that night after night to get to the house, and collapse at my feet.

That's near enough to a cry for help for me.

Each night he went out, he finally collapsed, exhausted. I would pick him up and carry him back to the house, where he slept for the rest of the night and most of the following day, waking only when I disturbed him for meals or medicine. I hoped that the experience would show him that he wasn't fit enough to go, but it never did. By the next evening he would have regained enough strength to do the same again, and his anger and frustration at once again finding himself where he wasn't supposed to be rapidly mounted to explosion point, providing sufficient motivation. The adrenalin reaction was enough to get him through the progressively more substantial barriers I erected, and carry him, in a semi-competent trot, into the bushes, out of sight of the house, before the reaction set in. Just strong enough to get himself into trouble, but not strong enough to even attempt to get himself out of it.

So I continued to take him out. I alternated, or rather vacillated, between letting him go, won over by his gallant struggle with the door, frustrated when I reinforced the barrier as soon as I saw him making progress but patiently renewed, only to see him suffer the disappointment and despair of being picked up and brought back where he started from when the inevitable collapse came, and firmly keeping him in, fretting or no, on the grounds of enforcing a necessary rest. On the whole it was perhaps better to take him out, since, though physically worn out, he was usually content to remain in for the rest of the night - after, of course, a token, face-saving protest.

I tried making various extraordinary additions to the furniture of the cats' room, tree branches and the like, hoping that when I did keep him in he would have the sense to practice and exercise, gradually regaining his climbing ability in the safety of the room before putting it to the test

in more dangerous conditions outside, where getting up a tree in a hurry might mean the difference between life and death. But `practice and exercise' are alien concepts to a pragmatist like an old possum: there needs to be an immediate reason for any action unless, in an access of *joie de vivre* in full health, it is done for fun. The only thing he was at all interested in was a step-ladder, from which he could see out the permanently closed window on the other side of the room. Like a cat, or like Snoopy as a baby, he could manage to get himself a little way up such a thing, at first hauling himself up by his arms alone, one step, then two, and later three, with long rests for recuperation on each step, but he couldn't get down. He had to just fall.

The next couple of times I took him out, it was exactly the same as the first. In all he got about fifty feet then collapsed. But then there was a sudden, dramatic improvement, he first doubled, then tripled, then quadrupled his distance, within as many days.

While in context the improvement was dramatic, in terms of what was necessary it was horrifyingly inadequate. Erik, delighted that he was improving, kept trying to climb. He would get two, maybe three, even four feet up the trunk of a tree, then, inevitably, come plummeting down. Exactly like Snoopy as a baby, for exactly the same reasons. The back legs were useless as a source of locomotion, and could be used only to secure his position for a fraction of a second while he made the next movement with his arms, and after a couple of repetitions the hind legs gave out under even this slight strain. In my mind I could just see one of the starved stray dogs that drift in from the Chase sitting under the tree, mouth open as its dinner fell into it.

What was if anything even more alarming than his weakness itself, or even the eventual nightly collapse on exposed open ground, was that Erik's expectations of his physical capacity were still those of a healthy possum. He would automatically go to jump up a tree, only to fall straight back. In time of danger he would have relied on his old prowess - possums don't run until freezing has failed, moving only at the last moment, a short lightning dash to the next refuge. Erik would have waited too long, and even if he had reached the next tree, fallen straight back on to his pursuer.

Upstream from the house, there was a point where possums who, unlike Snoopy, did not prefer to parade down the middle of a cleared track and cross the creek via the culvert, normally crossed the creek by jumping at the narrowest point, perhaps a foot or eighteen inches from bank to bank except in flood. Erik automatically went to jump across, and landed in the middle of the water. He was lucky that the creek, at that point, is no more than an innocuous trickle except in times of inundation. At least he learnt from that experience, and thereafter crossed a few yards away, where a fallen tree formed a natural log-bridge - itself a perilous procedure, since the dead wood became very slippery when it rained, and Erik's weak movements were the reverse of agile.

Erik's territory

As soon as Erik could get far enough from the house for a definite direction to be established, a pattern started to emerge. One night he would go downstream, the next upstream.

That seemed to explain a lot, in terms of his past appearances and disappearances. Even at that stage I suspected what was later confirmed, that he intended to go one night's journey upstream, then on night's journey downstream. When he was with us before, while his visits were erratic, they had been regular enough for the pattern to emerge. He seemed to have a three day run, with us in the middle. He would spend one night in our vicinity, disappear for a night, then come back, then disappear

again. Sometimes the pattern would be broken, for example when he and Snoopy were courting and he would stay longer with us; sometimes he would disappear for longer, presumably detained at one of the other stations by equally valid possum business. And then, sometimes he would disappear altogether for longish periods. I would guess that when that happened, his nose or his ears told him that something was doing in the further reaches of his territory when he was one night's run away, upstream or downstream, and so he shifted his base and took up a new three day run, of which we were not part, in that area.

At first he was pleased to have me in attendance. Before, he was always pleased to greet me in the bush, and, after a chance meeting, would sedulously attend me for the next half hour or so - mainly, of course, in the hope that I hadn't quite run out of titbits, but either he was even more over-optimistic than the other possums, or he liked the novel diversion of my company for its own sake, to judge from the time he hung around. I can remember on one occasion getting quite furious with him, when I was worried about Snoopy, then still in her first territory and clashing with Kylie: Snoopy would never come until after every other possum had departed from the vicinity, and Erik just would not leave me alone. In the end I accidentally discovered a way to chase him off - slapping the trunk of the tree in which he was perched. This was always a way of calling the babies, Joey, Snoopy and Kylie, to come down to me, but Erik responded in the manner possums are supposed to respond, apparently taking it for the sign of an approaching predator.

Now, when he was incapacitated, he seemed to understand that it was to his advantage to have me as a bodyguard, and was doubly pleased to see me.

And there was something else besides. There was one thing which at this stage gave Erik even more pleasure than wonderful food, and that was his own recovery. He rejoiced, exulted, in every new achievement, each time he managed, for the first time in weeks, to perform some action that was part of his normal possum routine, just like a baby possum gradually learning its adult skills. And, like a baby, he needed someone to show off to, someone to congratulate him on each fresh victory.

He proudly showed me, just as Snoopy would have done, a makeshift camping spot he'd found for himself, where he had presumably slept before he got back to the house. It was on the opposite side of the creek, a little downstream from the house, a fissure in the bedrock which breaks the surface at that point, three or four inches deep, and almost entirely open to the air.

He got in, snuggled himself down with a little sigh of relief, then looked up at me with sparkling eyes, glad to have finally got himself away from where I put him, back to where he thought he ought to be, and obviously expecting me to tell him how clever he was to find himself such a good place, then go on my way.

I didn't think it was such a good place at all. A passing dog would have winkled him out of there in three seconds flat. So I refused to leave him in peace, and sat down and waited, as I did at any of his stops along the way, until, hag-ridden and despondent, he finally hauled himself out and proceeded a little further, until he weakened visibly and I caught him and took him back to the house.

For I always did have to catch him. Unlike the babies, Joey, Snoopy, Kylie, he never came to me to be taken home - partially, of course, because I really was taking them home, while I was taking Erik somewhere he didn't particularly wan to be, at best back to `hospital'.

As he became stronger, he proved harder to catch - and more

unwilling, as his initial goodwill was eroded by the constant frustration of having me catch him and cart him ignominiously back to his starting point.

Erik, as the time approached when I was likely to catch him, gradually increased his pace, and I increased mine to stay with him. He would start to twist and turn and dodge, and I would follow.

It was like a time when I was sitting in Snoopy's territory, and suddenly found myself a couple of feet away, having ducked aside as Kylie sprang for my face, before my conscious mind had even realised that she was there. My feet just took over from me, swerving and dodging to anticipate Erik's moves, and while my mind, aghast, was still trying to work out why I had done that, my feet were already doing something else in answer to Erik's next ploy. Poor old Erik couldn't get away from me - I doubt whether he would have been able to even if he had been in considerably better condition.

There was no doubt at all that I was hunting Erik.

I probably don't have to say that the very idea of hunting, except for food, as a matter of survival, makes me want to vomit. That I should be hunting Erik.....

But it kept happening. Erik would start, very gradually and almost imperceptibly, to increase his pace. Automatically, without really noticing, I would increase mine to maintain the distance between us. and before I knew it, we were off again.

And of course, once it started, I had to go through with it, chase him until he was exhausted, and I finally ran him down. For, once Erik was fleeing, pursued, any hope that he might have returned to the house of his own accord was gone. And, dormant hunting reflexes notwithstanding, I was the least expert predator in the world, inhibited all the time by the desire not to distress the `quarry', vacillating, slacking off in the hope that Erik would get over his panic and slow down, at the very moment when something that really needed its dinner, having him temporarily cornered, would have gone in for the kill. If Erik couldn't get away from me, there was no way in the world he was fit to be out alone.

And the chases were not only ghastly, and repeated, but protracted. While Erik couldn't get away from me, that didn't mean that I could catch him immediately. In that sort of country, trees and shrubs with erratic passage ways through them alternate with patches of dense, apparently impenetrable vegetation, ten to twenty feet or so in diameter, composed of either thick brush, four to six feet high, or tall, fern-like creek vegetation, between a foot and three feet high; the latter is very strongly not recommended for human feet, since there are always holes and depressions in the ground under it, not to mention creeks, but the vegetation in question grows in such a manner that the top of each stem is on a level with its neighbour, regardless of how far down it starts, so that the upper surface of the patch as a whole is even and level, as if the ground beneath it were as smooth as a billiard table. Treacherous stuff. These patches appear from the outside to be almost solid, dense impenetrable walls of bush under a smooth unbroken surface. But beneath that surface there is always a maze of tunnels, the sort of thing commonly called `wallaby tracks'. Some, in the taller scrub patches, are probably indeed wallaby tracks, the tunnels being four to five feet high and usable by a smallish human, until they suddenly, without warning, come to a dead end - presumably the wretched animal jumped at that point. But the bulk of the tunnels are only about a foot or eighteen inches high, eminently suitable for, and used by, rabbits, bandicoots, cats and bushy-tails.

Erik's favourite ploy was, naturally, to dive into one of these

patches and lie doggo, hoping that I would go away. But it so happens that the sort of vegetation which forms these patches is also very brittle, rustling and rattling like Christmas decorations at the slightest disturbance. A fit bushy-tail can pass through without making a sound, but with difficulty. Erik, with his weak, awkward movements, left an audible trail like a dotted line, complete with arrows, whenever he moved. All I had to do was sit down and wait until he started to move again, taking a definite direction towards the edge of the patch, then dart around the periphery and intercept him as he came out.

But the line was dotted, the sound intermittent, for the substructure of the patch, branches and roots, naturally varied in detail from place to place, so that there were sections inches or feet long on his route where the passage was wide enough for him to avoid brushing against anything and giving himself away, and, as often as not, he emerged not exactly where I had anticipated but a few feet to either side, enough to give him a head start. So we were off again.

If harrowing, these incidents were also instructive. It was through them that I learnt the boundaries of his territory, something which, mercifully for my peace of mind, proved to be of more than academic interest later, when he was once more living independently and going about his normal routine and I went out only when I heard trouble, loud and long enough to suggest that he needed rescuing. My knowledge of his territory meant that I had a fair idea where he was likely to be at a given time on any evening, and so whether the ructions were likely to involve him.

I was following him one night, along the creek, upstream, when he started to increase his pace gradually, and I, of course, responded. Suddenly, in a place that looked to me no different from any other, he started to cry, the thin, piping baby cry of distress, which, at that point, I had never heard used by any adult possum other than Snoopy. I thought he was hurt, and redoubled my efforts to catch him.

It was as if I were running him into a brick wall. He twisted and turned, running first to the left, then to the right, along an invisible boundary, all the time crying, more and more distressed. Finally, in desperation, he turned, and headed back past me, the way he had come.

On later, less traumatic occasions, when my role had reverted more to what I intended it to be, bodyguard, not keeper, we returned to the same place, and Erik's actions made it quite clear that it was indeed the boundary of his territory. He reacted to that invisible line in exactly the same manner I reacted to human fencelines. He could run alongside it in either direction, he could exploit any curves or recesses in the line to their fullest extent, in a crisis, the most extreme emergency, he could go a few feet beyond that line, but beyond that he simply could not go.

Yet, for me, there was nothing at all to mark the spot. To relocate it in the daytime, I had to line up various nearby, but not adjacent, landmarks for human senses, a fallen tree, a wide deep pool in the creek with the track, such as it was, running around the very edge, a group of a particular sort of tree.

In similar, though less dramatic fashion, I learnt some of the other boundaries, the furthest extent of his range eastward in the band of lighter scrub running along the far boundary of the next property upstream, in the direction of Lane Cove Road, and similarly, the furthest he would go westward in the corresponding band of lighter scrub along the downstream boundary of the property we were on. I never did learn how far he went downstream in the creek belt itself - by the time he progressed that far he had recovered to the point where my resented interference was no longer necessary.

Erik's Tree

Erik was making physical progress all this time, and rejoicing in every new improvement, and not all the incidents were as unpleasant as the hunting. Each night, sure that he was now fully recovered and could shake me off whenever he wanted to, he set out with me along, quite cheerful, agreeable to my company as long as I maintained a respectful distance, until we reached the hunting stage. On one of these more amicable walks, we went downstream along the creek bank, on the opposite side from the house.

Not too far downstream from the house there was a largish gum, growing at an angle, steeply inclined from the vertical, out over the creek itself. Together with the trees on the other bank with which it connected it formed a bridge across the creek for arboreals. In that tree there was a large hole, too exposed to be suitable as a nest for a breeding female, but quite suitable for a carefree bachelor male to camp in. The people who lived in the house before me told me that there used to be a very large, friendly possum who lived there regularly, and came to the house nightly for a handout, until the intervening trees were cut down. For all I know it may have been Erik himself, although the time span would have been about eight to ten years.

Erik, after much scrambling, slipping, falling and starting again, finally managed to get up the trunk to the first fork, and on to the main branch stretching out towards the creek. And he threw his arms around that branch and embraced it.

It was not the desperate clinging of a feeble possum, afraid of falling, all claws and tension. I have, alas, seen that often enough to know the difference. Erik embraced that tree, he hugged it in the same way that Snoopy hugged my legs. It was Erik's tree, and he loved it, and at last, at long, long last, he was back in it.

That tree was to Erik what I was to Snoopy. It fed him and sheltered him and protected him - the `mother' of an adult possum.

When I saw that, all my doubts were resolved. It was all worth it, not only for me, but for Erik. It would have been worth it only for that, for those few moments of victory, the reunion with his tree.

But it was still the only tree Erik could get up, unless I actually put him on one of the lower branches. He was improving, but the improvement was in terms of, every night he scrambled further up the other trees before he fell off. As far as climbing was concerned, Erik's tree was a non-event. The angle of the trunk to the ground was so mild that I could have walked up it myself had I been so minded - did so, in fact, on a later occasion, to check the nest. So could any human being between the age of five and one hundred and five, lacking a specific climbing disability. Being able to go up that one tree wouldn't be much use to him if he ran into trouble elsewhere in his territory.

He didn't even manage to install himself in the nest properly. So it was back to the house.

His behaviour when I returned him to the house developed in much the same way as his behaviour in other respects. At first, while obviously disappointed, he made no more than a token protest before settling down, apparently quite contented, and going to sleep. I made sure when I went out that access to the annex was sealed off, apart from the hole in the door, which I left open in case Erik gave me the slip and returned himself. I'd carry him back to the door, and, after making sure that Kylie was not, as on one occasion, lurking inside waiting, post him through the hole like a letter. Whereupon he would sit down immediately inside the door, presenting me with a view of a very eloquent rump, fairly radiating sullen rebellion.

As often as not he left his tail trailing outside. Possums,

like dogs and cats, sometimes seem to disclaim responsibility for their caudal extremity, as if they had forgotten it was part of them. But with Erik, I suspect it was deliberate, child-like quibbling, pushing to the very limit as a gesture of defiance. I remember very distinctly saying, `In you go. All of you. And the tail.

Once I got the possum - and the tail - inside, I proceeded to reconstruct the Great Wall of China on the doorstep.

Erik's behaviour seemed to indicate that it was not so much the place he objected to, as the principle of being shut in. So, one night, after we had been out, and he had retired to bed in the wall of the closet nearby, I tried leaving the hole unblocked.

Of course, Kylie came in.

That just wouldn't do. Erik himself showed no inclination to go out again once he had been. It was merely the knowledge that he couldn't go if he did want to that distressed him. If he would stay without coercion, that distress was gratuitous. But leaving the hole unblocked was, literally, an open invitation to her ladyship.

I hit upon the idea of leaning a light, aluminium grate against the inside of the door. From the outside it looked as if the hole were blocked. Unless and until Kylie actually bothered to push it, she would presume it was thoroughly blocked, and either give up the idea altogether, or come in in her usual, more arduous fashion, squeezing under the roof. On the other hand Erik could, if he wanted to, easily flip it out of the way from the inside. In either case, the crash as it fell should alert me to what was going on.

Erik had already been out that night, and was in the closet wall, between the masonite and the outer wall. He watched my every move with the utmost care as I put the grate into position. I made slow, deliberate movements, calling his attention to them, and carefully demonstrated, repeating it slowly several times, just how easy it was to flip it out of the way. He watched, then came out and tried it for himself. Where I had used my hand, expecting him to do likewise, he scorned to go to the trouble of sitting up and using his front paws. He simply inserted his snout between the grate and the door, towards the bottom where there was a gap due to the inclination of the grate, and contemptuously sent it flying. Then, satisfied, he consented to go back to bed.

He looked rather askance when I replaced the grate, so I once again demonstrated, repeatedly, how easy it was to remove it. Then, reassured, he went to sleep.

The message, or a message, seemed to get through. He was no longer shut in, although I obviously didn't particularly want him to go out. The grate was only a token gesture, like one of his own nips. His action in removing the grate then consenting to go back to bed may have been an answer to my putting the grate in position, which he took to be a pantomime question, as, for example, a courting male's first approach to a female seems to be (at least with the more intelligent males who unambiguously demonstrate deliberate attempts to communicate with humans in other contexts). Question: Would he permit himself to be shut in? Answer: No! But he was willing to stay of his own accord if the offending barrier were removed. He may or may not have worked out, thereafter, what I was really saying, that it was not so much a matter of shutting him in as of shutting Kylie out. In any case, he accepted the compromise. Secure in the knowledge that he could get out if he really had to, he could afford to remain in, where it was comfortable, with a clear conscience and peace of mind.

Kylie, of course, put an end to the scheme the next night or the

one after that. As I should have known, she saw through the bluff sooner than expected, and once she knew came straight through the hole every time. And when she did, if Erik were in the closet, then alerted by the crash or no I couldn't get there in time to intercept her.

So it was back to the dry-brick wall. In any case, it once again became necessary. Erik's rebellion when I brought him back, like his obvious objections to being caught, became less and less of a gesture, and more and more of the real thing, as he got progressively stronger. He started to try to, and sometimes did, get out a second time, after I brought him in, only to be retrieved by me again. He would certainly have departed, at a stage when he was still regularly falling out of trees, had he been able to.

It all came to a head on Thursday, March 7, 1974. When I came across the date in what I wrote at the time, I was astounded, not to say confounded, since it meant that all this had taken place in at most about two weeks, since Erik first reappeared. So much had happened, with Erik going from a stage in which he literally couldn't move to one in which he was proving almost physically impossible to confine, that it seems like years. To Erik, no doubt, it must have seemed like all eternity.

By this time he clearly loathed the very sight of me. He was chafing at every restraint I put on him, objecting violently to everything I tried to do for him, even, uncharacteristically, starting to nip, and generally making it clear that he detested me and all my works. More importantly, his fretting had reached the point where it was having a visible, and real, effect on his physical condition, starting to undo what had been achieved.

On the other hand, he was still, as far as I was concerned, unfit to be out alone, and it was quite clear that his cumulative exasperation meant that once free, he would disappear, for some time at least. He still hadn't managed to climb anything but his own tree, and, while he was now at least beginning to get a more realistic idea of his own physical capabilities and avoid situations where he had to rely on his old prowess, he still kept trying to climb, and falling back helplessly. And he still couldn't get down the stepladder without falling.

Finally, I decided to keep him in, without risking any more expeditions, by hook or by crook until the following Monday, relying on the enforced rest to give him that final boost into relative competence. And then let him go, once and for all, never expecting to see him again. Never mind if he hated me afterwards, I would have given him the best possible chance and that was that. I was determined that the only thing which would alter that decision would be a total hunger strike on his part.

The edifice on the doorstep had reached its maximum dimensions and complexity, and in that form seemed to have finally defeated him, not, I suspect, because the puzzle was beyond his mental capacity, but rather because, in his weakened state, it wore him out physically to remove so many bricks. In any case, on the Thursday night, he accepted the situation with bad grace, making only a minor assault on the bricked up hole, desisting when he saw me reinforcing it with still more bricks as he worked, and going back to bed in dejected resignation.

On the Friday night he asked me to let him out. He could ask for that as well as Snoopy, or any dog, and in much the same manner, and it became part of our routine that he would ask, then I would go round and remove the bricks from the outside. Since I certainly had no desire to push him out when he didn't want to go, I usually waited for him to ask me before we went on our nightly stroll - or hunt.

When I refused to comply with his request on this occasion, he

went into the wall and sulked, indicating that he was going back to sleep, as on the preceding night. I left him for about twenty minutes, and when I got back Erik, master of lateral thinking, was purposefully demolishing the word of the door around the bricked up hole. He took absolutely no notice of me, but continued about his work, methodically gnawing and ripping with his claws, instead of, as I would have expected, haphazardly attacking the wood all round the hole, systematically concentrating his efforts on one side. He already had an opening almost wide enough for him to squeeze through. It was obvious that he was going to be out in another few minutes, if I didn't do something.

I summarily removed the possum to the stepladder on the far side of the cats' room, and rearranged the bricks on the inside of the hole, one on top of the other, in a manner that had kept Smiley baffled for weeks. I thought that should hold him for half an hour at least - it would all take time to remove. A few minutes later I heard him jump, not fall, from the ladder. There still seemed no urgency, but about two minutes after that I remembered something and went back to check. Erik had unblocked the hole and was gone.

I dashed out and round the house and spotted him, on the lowest branch of a sapling across the drive, one of the first little group of trees Snoopy used to go to, about ten feet up. That doesn't sound like much, but I knew from Snoopy's convalescence that it was the most difficult tree in the neighbourhood. It was the paperbark, in which possums couldn't go a couple of paces up the trunk then rest, as they did with other trees, because the bark simply tore away. They had to go up the whole ten feet in one whoosh, carried by the initial momentum, the most demanding thing of all where hind legs are concerned. And since what had been wrong with Erik was the hind legs, this seemed a pretty fair indication that he was capable of getting himself out of trouble. That tree had always been the acid test for Snoopy, and as far as I was concerned it was the acid test for Erik.

So I left him alone, and he disappeared. I'd done all I could for him, and intended to let him go as soon as he showed himself capable of coping at all, knowing that once he really started to recover keeping him in would only do more harm than good. I was only sorry that he hadn't stayed till he was a little stronger, and that I'd had to sacrifice is trust to hold him on Thursday, as it turned out to be only an extra day. It would have been better if I'd let him go, rather than have him escape, since there would still have been some chance that he might have come to me to be fed and dosed, and would still have benefitted by it.

It was only after he had thoroughly vanished, beyond retrieval, that a horrible thought struck me. Erik was obviously very used to humans, and I had a shrewd idea that ours was not the only house he visited for a handout. I knew he was actually on the mend, because I had seen him so much worse, but if someone else who knew him were to see him now for the first time in months, plucked, emaciated and weak, temporarily exhausted by the trip to their house, he could well appear to be a candidate for euthanasia. It was only because I'd had him for the past couple of weeks that I knew he was on the way up, not down.

It just wouldn't be fair if now, when, after all his sufferings and battling, he was on the verge of achieving what he wanted most of all, to get back to his trees and his territory and, on a more limited basis, his normal routine, someone, for the very best motives, were to pick him up and `put him out of his misery'.

So the next morning I trotted around all the houses I thought he could possibly go to, telling the tale or leaving long and involved missives and asking permission, where relevant, to intrude briefly on their property

to recover him in a crisis.

Apart from that, there wasn't much I could do. I could check the more obvious nests he indicated on his trips, the tree, the crevice in the rock, the abandoned shed on the property next door upstream, where he once had hidden under sheets of corrugated iron that had fallen to the ground - quite a safe refuge, actually, unless and until a human happens along as I did, and lifts the corrugated iron up bodily; I could leave the hole in the cats' room unblocked, while maintaining vacant possession for him. He wasn't anywhere obvious, and he didn't come back to the cats' room, as I'd half hoped, the next night.

I went looking for him at sunset on Saturday and Sunday, hoping to find him by ear when he first woke up, and wasn't so cautious. He wouldn't come to me, of course, but I heard what sounded like him crashing about in a patch of dense, fernlike undergrowth on the slope on the other side of the creek, upstream.

In my zeal to see that he was safe, I nearly did it again - I nearly found his nest. I remembered just in time that I wasn't supposed to find his nest, as that would violate it, and he would be forced to move, further away, to somewhere even more unsuitable - all the more certainly in this case, since the process of searching that undergrowth would, of necessity, destroy it.

Since he wouldn't come to me, all I could do was leave some food out for him on the log bridge over the creek and go away, hoping that he would get it before something else did. If he was anywhere upstream, he would have to come there in order to cross the creek to visit his usual haunts on the other side. And I was fairly certain that he was upstream. He may have collected some of his dinner late on Saturday night, as what was missing the next day coincided with his current food fads - at that juncture he preferred apple to banana, or even glacé cherry - and the faeces around the log looked like his, and different from those of the other possums.

On Sunday night and Monday, we had one of the mini-cyclones Sydney, and Ingleside in particular, seemed to be specializing in at that stage. On Monday there was no sign of him, although the food on the bridge was missing. On Monday night the storm worsened, to the point of being quite incredible. Nothing out in it could have lived. But Erik hadn't shown up.

About ten o'clock there was a temporary break in the weather. I went out, and discovered one possible reason why he hadn't come back - Kylie had left her baby in the roof and was patrolling the roof over, and the ground in front of, the cats' room.

At about 3 a.m. it eased off again, and I went outside to look. Matters were even worse. Kylie was still there, and there was a stray tomcat camped on the study window sill. I took some bread and went across the creek to leave it where I thought he was, just in case he had somehow survived.

The place where he had been camping looked as if a bulldozer had been through. The whole patch of brush had been flattened, and most of it washed into the creek.

Clearly, that was the end of poor old Erik. I hoped it had been quick.

I scattered some bread around forlornly, more in the hope that Bindi would find it, and I made a perfunctory search of the more hopeful possible refuges - the derelict shed and so forth. Everywhere it was the same story - bushes flattened, embankments washed away, erosion gullies turned into horribly rapid streams.

Finally I went back to check whether there was still dinner in

the cats' room - on a night like that everything was welcome to a handout, because nothing could go far outside.

Something had eaten a great deal of it since last I checked. I looked in the box, back in its original place, further inside where it was dry, and lo and behold - ERIK!

Quite dry and comfortable, thanks, but he made it clear that he still hated me, and wouldn't have come had his nest not swum away from him. He refused to eat what I offered him at first, but couldn't resist a grape - then was furious with himself for compromising.

I should have known. I had practically heard the violins playing sad and low in the background. Melodrama just wasn't old Erik's style.

After that, I decided I didn't need to pester Erik any further by trying to keep him in. He could obviously look after himself in that respect. And he had more sense than I did - while I was trudging around looking for him he'd come in out of the rain.

It shortly became apparent that there was another, more ominous reason for reversing my attitude. Erik had finished the prescribed course of antibiotics, and a further extension on top of it. But after he came off it his condition started to deteriorate rapidly. After consulting the vet, I tried giving him further doses. His condition improved again, and kept on improving.

The medicine in question is not supposed to work that way. Once the course is finished, it had done all it can, and further dosage had no effect. But in this case it did. Perhaps it was no more than the continuing coincidental symptomatic effect, allowing the rest of his system to make a partial recovery itself, but whatever it was, it was quite clear that Erik was dependent upon it to stay in a tolerable condition.

The medication in question, if taken in excess dosage or for a protracted period, produces the very thing that we were trying to counteract - total kidney failure. But Erik couldn't retain a reasonable level of health without it. Again, there was really no choice. There was no point in letting him drag on miserably, wretched and frustrated, for what was doubtfully a longer period - the symptoms themselves would in turn take their toll if allowed to continue unchecked. It really was going to have to be a short life and a merry one.

And that meant he had to keep coming to me, in order to get the medicine. Whereas before I was prepared to sacrifice his trust and regard in order to get him well, when it was a matter of a finite course of treatment, now I had to reverse my approach and go out of my way to avoid even letting him think I was going to do something untoward, like shutting him in, or making him eat something he didn't want to - or, indeed do anything he didn't want to. For now it had to be a permanent arrangement.

I must admit that, despite the sombre implications, I was far happier in this role. I'd much rather please a possum, and share its infectious pleasure, than torture one, even for its own good.

Erik continued to improve, and made an almost complete recovery. He started to put on weight, and his fur began to grow again.

The ridiculous thing was that his fur grew back grey. This, together with the fact that his period of near total starvation had shrunk him to half his former size, meant that, at first glance, old Erik the Red bore a striking resemblance to a young grey juvenile.[xxvii]

Erik was on top of the world, at this point. What he had wanted most was to be able to resume his normal life. Two obstacles had stood in the way of that: his own physical incapacity and my refusal to consider him sufficiently recovered for release. Once he had overcome both these

obstacles, he was free to enjoy the luxuries I offered, as a bonus.

His climbing continued to improve, and, instead of returning to the cats' room, he began to go up the low tree outside its door, on to the roof, and under the roof of the laundry. It was a hair-raising performance, for actually getting in there involved angling in from the roof of the annex through one of the few gaps wide enough for an adult possum, turning a somersault in the process. Theoretically, that should add to the virtue of the nest since, once the owner was inside, any would-be intruder was at his or her mercy while performing these contortions.

When Erik first decided to move into the roof, he was still weak, and his movements comparatively clumsy. I came out and stood by whenever I heard him making the attempt, and I seem to remember that on one occasion he really did fall. But the rest of the time, after heart-stopping slips, falls bar one foot, and much scrambling and scrabbling, he managed somehow. After a time, he became more practised in precisely those movements necessary, and their order became automatic, and he had little trouble.

This was a far more satisfactory nest from his point of view. It altered the whole complexion of things. I could feed him, but I couldn't get at him - there was no question of forcing him to eat anything he didn't want to, of picking him up and moving him, of disturbing his nest, or of shutting him in. I could slide my hand under the roof only on his sufferance; I could touch him only if he came to the opening to be touched. He began to use it in preference to the cats' room, more and more frequently.

His progress continued, always two steps forward and one step back, wild oscillations, but with a definite overall improvement. But then about two weeks after his first marked improvement began, he had a relapse.

He was suddenly almost back to where he started, but this time, at least, he was spared the starvation and exposure. His hair started to come out again in tufts, and he scratched compulsively, night and day, wearing himself out, but forced to keep on scratching. That could not be permitted to continue, so it was back to the vet. I got some more medicine which suppressed the scratching reflex - again it was a matter of being able to ameliorate the symptoms, but nothing more fundamental, and leave it up to him to recover.

This particular medicine came in the form of lurid blue pills, which had to be crushed, and a certain fraction of a pill introduced into his food each day - Erik made it quite clear that to his senses the smell and taste matched the colour, and there was no possibility of giving it to him directly. But whatever medium I tried, the result seemed to be blue slime.

Erik now took the antibiotic without too much fuss, and occasionally, though very rarely, would let himself be taken in by crushed cat condition tablet disguised as aberrant banana seeds or pepper in soft-boiled egg. But he most emphatically drew the line at blue slime.

I managed to get some into him, comparatively little, but either it was enough to make the difference or he recovered of his own accord. The scratching subsided, and he started to improve once again.

This time his fur grew back red.

He recovered again, although he never quite reached the same peak as before his relapse. But, by the same token, his condition stabilized, and while he still had his highs and lows, they were not the same wild oscillations as before.

When he was well, he went off and resumed his normal routine. I went out with him at first, but it soon became clear that he was more or

less capable of looking after himself, even while he was still recovering the second time. Although weak, and restricted in his movements, this time he had no extravagant expectations of his own capabilities, and avoided getting into situations which made demands beyond his physical capacity. Very soon he could climb again, adequately if not well, and after that it was a matter more of a lack, at times, of the old facility and grace in his movements, rather than actual disability.

After that I went out only occasionally, when I heard loud and prolonged trouble from where he could reasonably be expected to be at the time. Sometimes it turned out to be nothing to do with him - or me - but sometimes he'd slipped up, and become involved in a brawl. After such incidents I usually tried to catch him and bring him back to the house, to make sure there were no serious injuries - there never were - and to give him time to recover from the experience before something else happened. But Erik was still unwilling to be caught. My arrival was usually enough to break up the brawl, and the combatants, Erik among them, fled in all directions to various refuges. It was a matter of picking the place where Erik was hiding, and sitting down and waiting until he decided to show himself.

The first time, as I recall, it happened downstream, and when I captured Erik, probably unnecessarily, I was faced with the problem of getting a struggling, though not biting, possum back to the house, over somewhat difficult terrain.

I tried putting him under my coat, in the hope of inducing an infantile reaction - baby possum safe in the pouch. That worked - for about five seconds and as many paces. Then he came out again. I put him back again and it worked for an even briefer time. Nothing ever really works twice. So I took off my coat and wrapped him in it entirely, gathering the edges in my hand and holding it pendant, like a bag - or pouch - and proceeded post haste in the direction of the house. That worked for a little longer, since it took him more time to worm his way out. And so on, one trick after another, with nothing working twice, till we got to the house.

A few weeks later there were the sounds of an incipient serious skirmish from the light vegetation band stretching towards Lane Cove Road, on the opposite side of the next property upstream, where Erik had often gone on his walks but where the females seldom if ever strayed. I tore out, hurdling the fence, and found Erik up a sapling, squaring off at a younger mature male, equally willing, in the next sapling. It was almost certainly Prince Hal again.

I distracted them both with bread as best I could, and managed to persuade them to stay apart while tempers cooled. Eventually, Prince Hal departed in one direction, and Erik, with me dutifully trailing, then left in another, continuing, apparently, his intended route, since he went to another, slightly larger tree which he had previously favoured.

Seemingly, my interruption had allowed the question to be settled amicably, without loss of face on either side, as it sometimes does in a dogfight. Both had shown a willingness to fight, but Erik couldn't be blamed for not going on with it if I wouldn't let him, and Prince Hal could not be taken to task for not going on with it when faced by a possum and a human, of unknown intentions, but obviously sympathetic to his opponent. I didn't threaten or try to intimidate him, instead trying to persuade him to have something to eat, but the unorthodox combination was once again too much for him.

In any case, that was the last we saw of him. He was finally convinced that the king was not yet dead.

Snoopy, meanwhile, was also making physical progress in terms of recovery from and adjustment to her most recent injury, going out and coming back intermittently, under her own steam, or occasionally with me in attendance. The momentous evening came when, as I was camped down the creek waiting for Erik to come out of his thicket, there were sounds of a minor altercation from further up towards the house. A year before those sounds would have sent me flying in their direction if I weren't sure that Snoopy was safely inside, since even a minor skirmish would have been a serious matter for her. Now I realised, somewhat to my surprise, that for once Snoopy was not the most needy possum down the creek. She could handle that sort of thing on her own. I stayed and collected Erik, and Snoopy returned to the house, unscathed and untroubled, about an hour later.

Erik never seemed to take any harm from these episodes - it was more a precautionary measure on my part.

His lows were no longer particularly distressing either. When he was sick, he simply put himself to bed in the roof, snuggled down into a comfortable position, gave a deep sigh of contentment, then propped himself up on his forepaws, waiting to be regaled with bunloaf and warm milk.

He would stay there for a day or two, being fed and dosed, mostly sleeping, not apparently actively uncomfortable, like a human in a fever. And then, recovered again, he would resume his normal routine.

Sometimes, however, he woke up bored, recovering mentally before he recovered physically. And he started to chew the surrounding wood, despite the fact that he had demonstrated that he wasn't hungry. Naturally I discouraged this as best I could, yelling at him and banging on the ceiling. It wasn't my roof, and while I doubted whether the odd tooth mark on a beam would ever be noticed, I knew from the door that he was capable of real structural damage if he put his mind to it.

But he didn't really seem to put his mind to it. He persisted, in a desultory sort of fashion, despite my verbal castigation. But it seemed to be a casual, absent-minded sort of thing, like fiddling compulsively with the nearest object when you have nothing better to do. At first he gnawed at the masonite ceiling, and made no impression whatsoever, since masonite is singularly resistant to such treatment unless attacked from the edge. Then he turned his attention, such as it was, to the rafter which cut the ceiling of the laundry off from the ceiling of the lounge room. Apparently the gap between the rafter and the ceiling was too narrow for an adult possum to squeeze through, and all I had previously heard in the loungeroom ceiling were scurrying little bush-rats. Erik, to judge from the sound, set about widening the gap so as to give access to the lounge room ceiling, but he never achieved this end, although he was most assuredly capable of doing so, had he really set his heart on it. It was Bindi who later completed the job and, finding, like the bear who came over the mountain, that her effort was hardly worth it, then proceeded to stay, for the most part, in the established nest area back over the laundry. With Erik it seemed to be just a matter of occupying his time.

I suspect that this is yet another innate survival reflex. Possums do, in any case, occasionally eat wood, usually the tender stems of a young branch, the twigs that bear the leaves. A possum who is ill or injured, and confined to its nest, would of necessity have to eat the wood of the nest itself to stay alive, since nothing else is available. I had noticed dimly before, and more consciously observed afterwards, that when similar gnawing incidents occurred at Newport (equally discouraged by loud vituperation and a-banging on the ceiling from below), the possum most likely to be responsible proved to be off colour[xxviii] when I next saw it, even if it were only a matter of recuperation from the actual birth of a

baby.

Of course Kylie proved difficult at first. Although she was living in a tree at the time, Erik's presence in the ceiling drew her attention to it, reminding her that it was a desirable nest. I began to feel sorry for her. Here was yet another weak possum in a prize nest getting preferential treatment, a serviced flat, no less, with breakfast-in-bed.

There were a couple of bad brawls at first, when she insisted on going into the roof to evict him. Theoretically, Erik should have been able to keep her out, stopping her at the entrance. But she picked a time when he was deep in a feverish sleep, curled up further towards the lounge, and by the time he woke up and moved to do something about it, she was already effectively in. Naturally I did everything I could think of to distract her, yelling, banging on the roof inside and out, and the first time she duly backed down and came out again. Her first approach was in any case tentative, more in the nature of an experiment. But the second time she refused to be deterred, and it was Erik who emerged, woebegone and despondent.

He went off miserably into the bush. I overtook him and carried him back to the box in the cats' room, but after a short while he once again departed, disconsolate. The next evening, not certain what might have happened the preceding night, I took Erik's breakfast out and waited, but it was Kylie who came out of the laundry roof. Breakfast-in-bed departed forthwith.

She came back to the laundry to sleep that night, hopeful that the magic nest might still produce food. But Erik, who after consideration appeared to have got my message of the previous night, returned to the cats' room, and breakfast-in-bed followed him. Thereafter the matter was resolved quite simply: Erik never relapsed to the point where he was unable to meekly depart when challenged by a superior possum, so if Kylie wanted the roof, he transferred himself, together with his meals-on-wheels service, to the cats' room, no more than a trifle disappointed at being ousted from his chosen position. Or vice versa, if she wanted the annex, he took the roof. Sometimes her arrival coincided with his own projected departure, as he had already recovered from his low, and he went off about his normal business, to return, circumspectly, to whichever position was unoccupied, next time he felt a bit low.

This time, Kylie just couldn't win. I consoled her, together with Bindi and young Rikki, by gathering up the combined leftovers of Snoopy and Erik - a substantial amount of delicacies of the sort that any other possum would give its ears for - and giving it to them. Eventually, she became resigned to her fate, and from then on there were no more than the normal, negligible skirmishes.

In between whiles Erik, though physically somewhat diminished, was the same old Erik we had always known, coming in the window, obediently departing when Snoopy evicted him, without rancour or distress, cheerful, good-natured, supremely tolerant, with a zestful, infectiously whole-hearted and openly sensuous enjoyment of life.

I knew it couldn't last. If nothing else, the constant battle with the toxic effects must be taking its toll on his heart. It wasn't a time to worry about the long-term effects of sweets, or any other beloved tit-bits, or even to put off a particular treat until tomorrow, because his appetite for it might surfeit - it could well be that for him tomorrow wouldn't come. If it did come, I would just have to devise something new to please him. Erik could have whatever he wanted, as long as he could get the message across to me. And he became very adept at getting his message

across. And greatly appreciated the results.

But it did last, until the middle of winter. Typically, there was no real melodrama. His final departure was indistinguishable from any of his previous departures. He just imperceptibly slipped away.

He had re-admitted himself temporarily a couple of nights before, and was recuperating in the roof. He had almost recovered, though, left to himself, he might perhaps have stayed one more night. But Kylie arrived, with other ideas, at sunset, so Erik, a trifle disappointed, but by no means really downcast, mooched off about his business. I expected him to come back to the cats' room to sleep later that night, but that was the last I saw of him.

Nothing particular happened to mark the occasion from the rest. There was only one incident which might, in retrospect, perhaps be relevant. There was heavy, but not torrential rain, later that night, and Smiley, the young tomcat, who had been off on one of his tomcat expeditions, returned, covered in blood. After the first panic, when I cleaned him up and found there was no real damage except a multitude of shallow scratches, I started to wonder whether Erik might have been the other half of the fight. At that stage young Smiley, his ambitions overvaulting his fighting prowess, frequently returned in a damaged condition, and, by the same token, I had seen him from the window often enough, when he didn't know I was watching, to be sure that his behaviour with possums when I wasn't around was the same as it was when I was present - he avoided them if possible, and, if they met, expressed a verbal opinion and departed, without any attempt at physical violence. If Smiley had indeed become involved with Erik, then it really would have been an accident.[xxix]

However, it was in weather like that that those rare genuine accidents can occur - totally unexpected physical collisions, with all warning of the approach of either party masked by the rain, a fight already started, with each party committed, before either has time to think of a way to avoid it, both combatants within critical distance before they know it. I checked Smiley's injuries again - they seemed typical of a cat rather than a possum fight, the scratches too shallow and fine for Erik's claws. I had worried myself unnecessarily before over some wild contingency, some barely possible incident which suggested something might have happened to Erik.

Erik had been away, before, for up to three days, without anything untoward having occurred. But three days passed, then five, then a week. I made a half-hearted search, checking all his know hiding-places, but found nothing. It was one of those cases where, by the time you know there is anything really wrong, it is too late to do anything about it.

Whatever happened to Erik, it was almost certainly quick. He was unlikely to have gone beyond his three-day run at this juncture, and given his condition when he left, he would certainly have been able to get back to the house from anywhere within that area if what happened was not immediately fatal.

It was only about a year later that I found the skeleton of a long, rangy possum under one of his regular trees in the lighter vegetation belt leading towards Lane Cove Road, on the far side of the next property upstream, while I was looking for Snoopy. It was too old for Snoopy, but, had it been there when I was looking for Erik, I would certainly have seen it. It is at least possible that Erik was up one of his own trees, comfortably wedged in a fork and concealed by leaves, when his heart gave out, and later storms brought his body to the ground.

There was no Empty Nest reaction from the girls. Probably the erratic comings and goings of males are such that they had no way of knowing he was gone for good. I was the only one who knew we wouldn't be seeing him

again.

The miracle to me, in all of this, was that Erik didn't hate me. I had fully expected him to do so, but he didn't. He became wary and suspicious, and cautious about letting me handle him, but at the same time it was evident that he still liked me, and to a certain extent still trusted me. Not because he understood what I was trying to do for him - there was no way in which he could understand. At best, he might have concluded from my body signals that I was an obstinate, misguided, if well-intentioned idiot, at worst that I was a sadist deliberately inventing refinements of torture with which to increase his suffering. He decided to opt for the lesser charge, considering me a well-meaning fool, not a knave, someone to be approached with caution, not hostility. He didn't hate me, not because he knew what I was trying to do, but just because he was Erik.

And twice in her life, Snoopy loved him. That, as far as I am concerned, is a pretty good recommendation.

FLORUIT SNOOPY

Snoopy, in the meantime, went from strength to strength. She was still putting on weight, and seemed to be growing, gradually overhauling her own granddaughter. She started going out more frequently, always, as far as I could tell, to the middle creek area, or down the creek. Only once did I see her anywhere near her first territory, up a small sapling near the drive, apparently taking the alternative route home.

She was often so late that I grew worried, particularly if I heard a dog or a brawl, and went out to meet her. But she always turned up unscathed - from somewhere further down the creek, well beyond my permitted sphere of activity, whenever I could tell the direction. I was reassured by what I saw of her outside behaviour, too. Always she was alert, and super-cautious. Always she waited until all the other possums were safely out of the way, and whatever danger there might have been had passed, before putting in an appearance.

It was very, very seldom indeed that I found her when she didn't deliberately attract my attention. I could find every other possum in the vicinity first - even, and especially, Bindi, the nearest approximation to a `wild' possum, who frequented the same general area, apparently also considering Kylie, upstream, a trifle overwhelming. On the rare occasions that I did see Snoopy when she didn't know I was watching her, she looked extremely competent, and very much alert. There was, to be sure, one incident when we almost collided on the path by accident, and she took off in fright, only to be stopped in her tracks by a cry of, `Kimmon Snoop.' But then I had rather more surprise confrontations with the others. In fact, Snoopy outside seemed no different from any of the other possums - except that the years of physical inferiority had developed her sense of caution, and skill in self-effacement, to an even greater degree than theirs.

Like the others, she was very beautiful out there in the moonlight, posing on a branch, a nebulous, silver-touched shape silhouetted against a background of stars. That's the way possums are meant to be seen, not as clumsy, frightened, dirty yellow creatures in the day.

Egotistical, I know, but I never quite got over the thrill of seeing the transformation in this little wild creature, so much part of her surroundings, when, recognising me as I came out to meet her, she changed before my eyes. Her muscles, taut with wariness, relaxed; the wild light died out of her eyes, in its place an expression of affectionate delight; she came racing along the ground to meet me.

For she was usually very pleased to see me, accepting a lift home in the name of friendship, though occasionally she felt the need to assert her possumhood by walking. If anything had occurred to alarm her, my

arrival was particularly welcome - a mobile part of her territory, safety and security, coming out to meet her.

With increasing frequency, however, she by-passed me. Presumably, while I was sitting silently beside the creek, listening for any slight rustle that might indicate her presence, she went home by a more circuitous route without betraying herself by any such indication. After waiting in the cold for a couple of hours, I would go back to the house, filled with forebodings, only to find a somewhat disgruntled possum. She had come home expecting me to be there. Where on earth had I been? She wanted to perform her sleep ritual, and I was holding her up. She inspected my shoes with extreme care, as if she suspected me of unfaithfully attending Another Possum.

Finally, I gave up going out unless I actually heard a brawl and could place it. I couldn't, in fact, find her otherwise, unless she decided that I should, or unless I had some indication of where she was. There was really nothing I could do except cause unnecessary nuisance to myself and her. She continued to go out and come back successfully, in her usual intermittent way.

One part of me said that it was madness to let her go when I didn't know exactly where she was going. There were good and valid human reasons why I couldn't go with her downstream: the properties in that direction had human occupants. While my compunctions about encroaching on the `vacant' land upstream, where I disturbed no-one and did no harm, were not insuperable, I simply couldn't go charging through someone else's back yard at one o'clock in the morning, yelling and waving a torch unless it were a matter of a genuine and certain emergency. Half-suspected crises, false alarms, were too frequent - they happened about one time in every three that Snoopy went out. I had only two options, keep Snoopy in all the time, or let her go alone.

And it was apparent that Snoopy, now, was adult possum, aware of her own limitations, and far more aware than I was of conditions outside. I had a dramatic demonstration of this one night at about this time, on the occasions of the most complete communication that ever passed between us.

As always, it was a matter of one party drawing the attention of the other to the situation, asking, and leaving it up to the other party deduce the details from the circumstances. Snoopy came hurtling in the window in the middle of the evening, as if all the demons in hell were on her heels. There was nothing unprecedented in this. In the past they often were - they were large and hairy and trichosurine and I shut the window in their faces as they followed her up the plank.

But this time it was different. I had seen Snoopy frightened by possums, dogs and cats, and this was none of these. There was no doubt whatever in my mind that Snoopy, begging me to close the window behind her, was trying to tell me that there were human intruders.

While I never doubted what she was trying to say, I had strong doubts about her accuracy. I went outside and scouted around the house, surveyed the scene from a distance, and detected nothing. I went back inside, and told her she was mad. But Snoopy persisted, she wasn't satisfied until I had closed and locked[x] every window and door, every conceivable entrance, in the place, and even then took up position at the window near the desk, peering anxiously into the darkness.

The next day a neighbour asked me if I had been in a particular

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x. She knew the difference, since the two windows in the study were left closed but unlocked when I was out, and she had on occasion pushed them open herself.

part of the property at the time Snoopy came rushing in. When I said no, she told me that she had seen a torch flashing there - there must have been intruders. Had I seen them?

I said, `No, but Snoopy did.' Being used to dogs herself, and knowing the degree of subtlety possible in their communications, she didn't question this, or need any explanation.

As usual, in matters possums should know about, Snoopy was right, and I was wrong. The intruders had been there, all right, although I failed to detect them. In all probability it was a quite innocent instance of trespass - malefactors do not usually advertise their presence by waving torches about - very likely a matter of yet another straying animal. But Snoopy was also right, in the interests of self-preservation, to assume the worst about any stranger of unknown intentions, and run, and I was glad to discover that she took such a sensible attitude.

Her adulthood showed itself in other ways, too. She introduced a new element into her sleep ritual, something I have alluded to before. Now, as well as cuddling up beside me, she would embrace me, as much of me as she could manage, standing up on her hind legs, if I were lying on my side, the attitude, turned through 90 degrees, of a mother possum cuddling her baby protectively against her underside while she sleeps. And after grooming herself, she would set about systematically washing me, taking possession of one hand, and methodically starting from the tip of the little finger. The magnitude of the task was somewhat beyond her. She usually fell asleep before she had finished the first hand.

Whereas once I had been her substitute mother, now she regarded me, to a certain extent, as her substitute baby.

Then, too, she seemed to need to scuttle less, although she still did it briefly, at some time during the evening, apparently simply for pleasure.

Beyond that, her whole attitude in the house showed that she had reached her years of maturity. Before she had been vibrant and vivacious, but nervy, highly-strung, like a young filly, quiveringly alive. Now, happily fussing about her business around the house, she exuded serenity and placid contentment. What with this, and her increased bulk which now made it more convenient for her to drape herself across both my shoulders rather than perch on one, she began to remind me a great deal of my old friend, Mrs. Poss.

It is ironic that it was those two possums, both of whom retained the ability to revert to baby ways for pure pleasure when the opportunity was afforded them, who were the very ones who elected to treat me as a baby.

Snoopy was an adult possum, and she should know what she doing. So I made no alteration in the arrangement about going out. She remained free to go or stay. In the last analysis it was her decision - she was the only one with the knowledge to make it; in possum terms she was by no means unintelligent, and she had demonstrated that she had a developed degree of sound common sense.

Snoopy, like her roof-loving kin, was of course blessedly unburdened by romantic notions about possums and trees and stars, and in the event still stayed in more often than she went out. As far as she was concerned, she belonged equally, if not more, in the house, with her bed and leaves and chairs and reassuringly closed windows, designed so expressly for meditating possums. If she considered the outside world to be at all suspect, she stayed very firmly put; there were still occasions when I punctiliously, and mistakenly, opened windows she wanted closed.

If she stayed out too long when she did go, I opened the front

door to give her another, less demanding way of getting in, and to assuage my anxiety by being able to hear more clearly. On one occasion, but only one, this proved to be a provident precaution. She staggered in the front door one night, hardly able to move, with all the signs of a bad beating. Just like the night when she disappeared, I hadn't heard a thing.

She recuperated for a few days, and it became apparent that there was no serious damage. While I was very upset to see her hurt, I began to be rather pleased. She'd gone a long way, out of earshot, and got into trouble, but she had got herself out of it, too, and managed to make her way home. Till now, my greatest worry was her trust in me - she relied on me to get her out of trouble, and there may have been a touch of reproachfulness about her look when she came in. But this experience must have disabused her of any notions about my infallibility. She knew now, if she didn't know before, that I had my limitations. If she, because of the upstream possum situation, had to go beyond my control, and where I couldn't hear what was going on, then her only protection was her own ability to look after herself, to evaluate the situation, and stay out of trouble with which she couldn't cope. Now we both knew where we stood, she that she couldn't depend on my intervention beyond a certain distance, I that she could cope with a moderately serious situation on her own.

After a few days' convalescence she was back to normal - for the most part staying in and conducting her possum business inside, attending to her territory, eating and enjoying all the possum luxuries at her disposal, sitting with me and being part of what I was doing. Sometimes she went out, and usually came back herself; sometimes I met her on the way. In the event, that was the last trouncing she was to take, as far as my knowledge of her history goes.

Kylie

In the meantime Kylie had become less and less of a problem. She slept in the roof intermittently, but fairly frequently, and came regularly for her handout, usually waiting on top of the tank for me to take something out to her.

On the rare occasions when she did come to the window, Snoopy's advantage as the territory holder was usually enough to enable her to put Kylie out herself. Kylie seemed to have lost the personal edge to her antipathy towards Snoopy and me. Apparently, she had finally forgotten the parental relationships, and settled down to regarding me simply as a human food-giver, and Snoopy as a neighbouring female possum, to be attacked when the situation arose, but with whom conflict was not gratuitously sought.

If she had relinquished her designs on Snoopy's nest, she still, however, retained designs on her warm milk. Rikki was now semi-independent, living in the nest over the bedroom, while Kyle usually selected the nest over the laundry, but I suspected that Kylie was pregnant once again. The door between the lounge and the kitchen area, with the cats' room annex beyond, was usually kept shut once I had finished getting the dinner, and the rest of the milk I'd warmed for Snoop left to cool on the stove. Kylie developed the habit of coming in through the cats' room and helping herself to it.

At this stage there were three outside possums turning up separately - given the choice, possums will come *seriatim* for their share to avoid the conflicts of the feed-group situation. For although Rikki still sometimes came with Kylie, Bindi, herself now pregnant, came alone. Frankly, I got tired of traipsing out in the cold umpteen times a night, often to find the same possum as before, ever-optimistic, trying for seconds. And if I left enough dinner for all of them out on the tank, the bush-rats came and cleaned up every scrap.

So I capitulated, and got into the habit of covering the top of

the stove with an old enamelled tray, leaving the milk saucepan together with plenty of food - Snoopy's leftovers, combined with ordinary leftovers in the way of scraps of fruit or bread, and supplemented by the addition of first-hand bread to ensure there was enough for all.

It worked very well. The kitchen was by this time an established part of the cats' domain - they were unwilling to yield the proprietorial rights acquired while Erik was convalescing in their own room - and rats seldom ventured inside, or lived to tell the tale if they did. The cats and possums, who cordially despised each other, nevertheless managed to come to an arrangement. They kept out of each other's way when possible; with the cats also wandering in and out freely, of their own accord, meetings were infrequent. If a cat was asleep somewhere off-route when a possum arrived each party looked at, identified, then ignored the other. When close encounters did occur, sometimes one fled, sometimes the other - the cat to the other end of the room, the possum to the nearest vertical object, usually the door-jamb. Verbal discourtesies were exchanged on both sides, and that was that. A minor fluster to break the monotony, with no harm done. But the presence of the cats meant that the outside possums didn't entirely feel at home and so, while they took their time eating their share, up to twenty minutes, they had no real motive for prolonging their visits beyond that, and as a result left plenty for the next comer.

One consequence of this was that I actually saw the possums less often. I heard them, of course, and had a good idea whether it was Kylie or one of the more nervous youngsters from the movements, but I seldom disturbed them except by accident. The younger ones were prone to panic if I turned the light on, and shoot out the door leaving a trail of overturned and broken utensils, and even Kylie was sometimes startled for a moment by the sudden barrage of illumination.

She was by now much more approachable. She had never in fact stopped taking food from my hands, but I had abolished the practice of my own accord at the height of her vendetta. She was too apt to ask politely, take the food gently, then suddenly, without warning, drop it and leap for my face, her reflexes triggered by my proximity. She was a very much more stable, placid character now, but I nevertheless made no overtures towards a closer relationship. I was quite content to be no more than a kitchen cupboard as far as she was concerned.

Even so, by October 1974, I noticed that she was not merely placid, but actually subdued. I saw her a couple of times walk the long way round rather than risk contact and conflict with Bindi or Snoopy, something which seemed quite inexplicable. With Kylie, prudence perhaps, but actually giving way without even a face-saving pretence at a threat, never! Her visits to the kitchen now became nightly, and she was spending a great deal of time there. Her predilection for milk increased, and in addition to her cleaning up all that was left in the saucepan, I noticed that the cats' milk was disappearing more regularly than they themselves normally drank it all.

I watched Kylie when she came in the next night, and found that she was having trouble eating, unable to open her mouth properly on one side, and unable to chew what was inside, except very slowly and with great difficulty. It crossed my mind that Madam Dracula might have met with poetic justice: although her core territory lay upstream, she was not averse to following the established possum routes downstream on occasion, and certainly frequented the same clump of bushes and saplings just down from the house in which Snoopy and the others browsed; she might have given Snoopy her last beating, and dislocated her jaw in the process of trying to manage and even more ferocious bite.

It could equally be a bad tooth, or some other temporary ailment. I decided to leave her alone, but watch her, for a couple of days: the moral with sick possums is always *primum non nocere*.

She grew no better, however, and, if anything, was slightly worse. It was apparent that she was not getting enough to eat, simply because she couldn't chew fast enough. One side of her jaw seemed locked. She'd lost her new baby, if she was ever having one, and she was miserable and defeated. I'm sure the psychological factors played a part too - Kylie, who had always been cock of the walk, was now forced to give way to everyone. Her main weapon had been taken from her, she was effectively defenceless, and she couldn't risk a scuffle with her own half-grown daughter, or even, the worst humiliation of all, with Snoopy. Kylie couldn't bite.

I shut her in the kitchen-laundry overnight, with a good supply of leaves and food. She was a little taken aback when she found she couldn't get out, but she seemed to have passed the point of caring too deeply, and gave no trouble. All she wanted was a dark corner to crawl into. I took her to the vet the next day.

The process was messy and complicated. Possums are usually quite docile when dormant, particularly sick possums, but if they do happen to wake up and panic they can cause plenty of trouble. Kylie was still Kylie. While she seemed to be mentally past the point of protest, she was underfed, not starving, and in no way physically weak. I didn't dare risk taking her on the back of the bike. Public transport in the area effectively didn't exist. I managed to get a lift down to the vet, but had to walk a fair way and wait for an hour before getting a taxi back.

Kylie didn't stir throughout. But the expedition proved unsuccessful, in that it was impossible to diagnose the trouble without a closer examination than could be risked with a possum of her known character, unless she was anaesthetized. Possums are very dicey with anaesthetics, and the only safe one under the circumstances happened to be out of stock. I had to take her home and bring her back the next day.

I scoured the neighbourhood for the tenderest and most succulent leaves of all varieties. There had been long rains before, and, from a possum point of view, the eating was never better. When Kylie woke up that evening, I set before her a full Snoopy-type dinner, bread-and-milk as with Erik, fruit, and every different sort of leaves. She ate the bread and milk without much enthusiasm, and the sight of the leaves only made her shrink with misery. With my encouragement she tried, and managed to nibble half of the tip of a gum shoot in about ten minutes. She was slowly starving to death in the middle of the best food she had ever known, and the sight of it only tortured her.

I knew then that it was cure of kill with her. Snoopy and Erik were battlers, they both loved life, and extracted the maximum pleasure from it, and they wanted above all to live, even at the cost of pain and under unfavourable circumstances. For Kylie it was all or nothing. She could never survive as a partly fit possum, and she had already given up.

Even so, keeping her in the second night was a different matter from keeping her in the first. Like Erik, she was prepared to stay put for a limited period - the novel comforts and security after she'd been in danger compensated for the confinement for a while. But when she decided to leave she simply did so. Some time during the night. Above the sink there was a small window in which the glass had been broken: temporary repairs had been effected by thumb-tacking fly-screen wire on the outside and using a removable board to block it from the inside in bad weather. Kylie removed the board, and pushed the wire until the wood broke away from the tacks.

Ten seconds' work, once the idea occurred to her. She wasn't in any of the roof nests.

I cancelled the veterinary appointment and made tentative arrangements to bring her in whenever I could catch her. Rather to my surprise she turned up the same evening - I had expected her to take off for a few days, like Erik, after confinement against her will. Apparently either the ease with which she had escaped convinced her I couldn't really hold her, or she found that there was simply nothing for her outside any more.

She was nevertheless reluctant to come in, and sat on the roof of the little kitchen `meatsafe' annex. I could reach her from a stool, but it brought my face level with her, something I wasn't particularly keen on, so I donned full protective armour before I went to pick her up.

She came like a lamb. She made no attempt to escape that night, but ate a little food and went to bed. She seemed to have decided that she could do nothing, and so put herself in my hands.

Next morning I put her on the back of my bike and took her down to the vet. She was a large, strong possum, and the maximum safe dosage failed to put her under entirely, but quietened her enough for an examination. The problem was not a broken or dislocated jaw, but a growth, which of several possibilities was not determined, for in any case the prognosis was the same. She couldn't be helped, she couldn't get better, she could only get worse and slowly starve to death.

I might have kept her going for a while on liquids and semi-liquids, but there was no point. I'd seen enough to know that she would only be miserable. There wasn't much of a decision to make, but I couldn't help feeling that I'd let her down - at the last, she had come to me for assistance.

It didn't help that like most sick animals she had reverted to her infantile behaviour - this wasn't the great ravening Kylie, it was gentle little Ki-ki again. I smeared some honey-biscuit, her greatest treat, on her mouth when she went under after the second needle, in case she recovered consciousness briefly - she was a very strong possum, and hadn't reacted predictably, and if by any chance she did recover consciousness briefly I wanted her to taste it. For the same reason I took her home, and put her in the laundry, a place she knew, and under one of her nests.

True to form, she lived much longer than expected, but eventually the side effects of the anaesthetic wore off, and she just slept quietly. The change from that, when it came, was imperceptible. I waited a couple of hours afterwards, to be sure, then buried her in her own core territory, out of indefensible sentiment.

That was in October, 1974. She was just three years old.

I went back and joined Snoopy, happily asleep under the bedcover. She would be the last person to know why I was unhappy - it could only be the best thing in the world for her. As usual, I didn't try to let her know that I was upset, and, as usual, she was very pleased to have my company during the daytime - it represented a bonus. She snuggled up against me, and went blissfully back to sleep, completely content with the wonderful world.

But I felt as if everything in the place was dying, the adopted baby, Erik, then Kylie: they'd both come to me, and I couldn't really help them. It didn't help, either, that the juvenile, Rikki, had disappeared; a couple of weeks later I found the body of a juvenile male which bore a striking resemblance to Rikki in a particular spot on Mona Vale Road. I felt as if I ought to get out of there before I died, too.

But Snoopy was alive, and happy, and she proved it by snuggling

against me, and I started to realise that that was all that could really matter as far as I was concerned.

Erik and Kylie were normal, healthy possums, who had to take their chances, and there was nothing I ought to do about them beyond what I had done, the occasional helping hand, and a bit more if they were in real trouble, if they `asked' for it. Erik died in old age, free and in his own territory, and, although he'd suffered, he'd enjoyed the food he always coveted, and some he hadn't dreamt of, he'd enjoyed getting well enough to return to his trees, and his assisted victories, and the luxury of having a protected nest in the house, and life in general, and I'm confident that if he could have made the decision, he would have chosen the same way. He'd showed it in the way he battled on, just as Kylie showed that she had given up.

Kylie's death was premature, and less happy, but there really had been nothing I could do about it except spare her the coming misery.

She inherited no weaknesses from Snoopy, and the only thing that could be laid at my door was her character. In possum terms, she had all she could have asked for, a large uncontested territory, an area where the native vegetation was plentiful, and in greater variety than in most suburban situations, conveniently concentrated (as I later confirmed) in a much smaller area than in the majority of bush situations, such as the neighbouring parts of Ku-ring-gai Chase, so that each possum location offered a wider choice of food. In addition, she had a choice of tree-nests, handily located in her core territory, and over and above this all the suburbanite advantages, a choice of nests in the roof, and handouts if she cared to ask for them politely. Her only justifiable complaint was that she knew that something even better existed, a core territory in the house itself, she'd experienced it once, and she knew that it was inexplicably owned by a weaker possum, her own mother, no less. She responded as any female possum would, and her only mistake was that she didn't realise that I wasn't a possum. That was probably ultimately my fault, but if I hadn't interfered in the first place Kylie would never have been born at all - her mother would have died when she was three days old.

They both had a pretty fair go. I couldn't look after all the possums in the world, and most of them were more than capable of looking after themselves. Interference would only harm them. My meddling, except in minor ways that didn't alter their ability to care for themselves, must start and end with Snoopy. She still needed the facilities I provided for her survival, and it was by good fortune that these facilities also comprised the things which made her supremely happy.

Even so, I couldn't help missing Kylie. Hers was such a dominant personality that she left almost palpable holes in the landscape, the places where she ought to be, but wasn't. For a time, whenever I happened to pass through her territory at night, I caught myself looking up at her favourite trees, expecting to see her perched on a branch, and seeing only empty space.

Snoopy always gave me a great deal of comfort at times like this, without knowing it. It upset her to see me distressed or ill, not, I'm afraid, from sympathy. It upset her in the same way that it upset Joey when I played dead. As far as I know, I was to Snoopy variously and simultaneously her mother, part of her territory, and part of her safest nest, her non-possum friend and, occasionally when the mood took her, her baby. In all but the last aspect my role was that of protector rather than protected, and I represented security. Any reversal of roles which wasn't instigated by her meant a sudden inversion of the natural order. The world was suddenly turned upside down, and in a particularly unpleasant manner,

since what was supposed to be security was itself in difficulties.

So I had to pretend that all was as usual, and Snoopy gave me far more comfort than she ever knew. If the world went wrong and I made mistakes I had only to see her blissfully asleep under the bedcover, or happily going about her business, to know that I'd done one thing right. And when she came to me and looked up with love in her eyes, or sat beside me and gently held my finger in her hand, or just sat and leant against my foot when I was in a lighted room, despite her preference for darker places, I knew that whatever idiocy I'd committed, and whatever anyone else thought of me, she still loved me, unquestioningly and without censure. If the window got broken, or the fridge gave up the ghost, or my thesis ran into a blind alley, or I couldn't work out where the next month's rent was coming from, the day always ended, and I went to sleep with her curled up beside my feet, or with the sound of her scuttle in my ears, or listening to her happily tucking into fruit or leaves that, tonight, for her own unfathomable reasons, were suddenly the most delicious food in the world. And I knew she'd be there, cuddled up under the bedcover, or snuggled up under the bed, in the morning. She gave me a great deal, but the only way I could thank her was not to let her know I needed her comfort, but just show her that I loved her, too.

If she could be a great source of reassurance, she could also, at times be a source of anxiety. She continued to go out and come back, sometimes after only a short absence, going just as far as the bushes in the central creek, but sometimes she went further, and was absent for several hours.

She didn't return to her old territory - Bindi had taken that over, though, when her first baby, Snug, was at the stage where it would normally have been sleeping out of the pouch, she followed her mother's example and moved back into the roof. Bindi's own first tree, the one where I suspected she had been living when she first declared independence but where I could see no possible nest, had now revealed its secret, and its loss, in a dramatic fashion. The hole had been at the bottom of a deep fork, completely out of sight from the ground, creating a weak point in the tree. After a storm a huge limb had split off at this point, leaving a neat section of the now useless nest. But it was still probably a matter of choice, dictated by the advantages of the roof under these circumstances, for there was, as I later discovered, another nest in a nearby tree which she used at a subsequent date, in all likelihood Kylie's own nest. Bindi likewise came back to the roof later, with her second baby, Meggs.

So, from Snoopy's point of view, the territorial *status quo* remained. She continued to disappear downstream. As Kylie's ferocity had waned, and her own competence and confidence increase as she learned to compensate, physically, for her foot injury, and as her statue and stature increased with age, she had been going out more frequently. After Kylie vanished entirely, she began going out even more frequently, for even longer periods, so that by the end of November she was going out almost every evening, and staying away for the better part of the night.

At first I was greatly alarmed, and went out looking for her, only to have her by-pass me. On a couple of occasions I even trekked up the creek, afraid that she might, once again, have been driven up towards Mona Vale Road, only to return, scratched, dirty and wet (because the upper part of the creek was virtually unknown to me and some of it turned out to be where I wasn't expecting it) only to find Snoopy, unconcerned, eating her dinner when I got back, or sitting on the bed, aggrieved because I wasn't there. It was evident that I was the only one alarmed by these false alarms. So I decided that I wasn't going to even start to worry until 3

a.m. at the earliest.

But then came one ghastly night, when 3 a.m. was long past and there was no sign of her. I went up the creek, then down the creek, as far as I had ever been, hearing and seeing nothing. I returned to the house as dawn was breaking, and frantically lifted up the bed, pulled out the drawers, checked every alternative nest she had ever used, then everywhere else she could possibly have concealed herself. No Snoopy. I was sure she was dead, this time.

At six o'clock, in full daylight, she nonchalantly trotted in through the front door, unscathed and unworried. She couldn't understand why I was crying.

After that I decided that I needed a respite. It was too harrowing. I most reprehensively shut her in for the next couple of nights. She grizzled a bit, and looked very disappointed when it became evident that the window was going to remain shut, but after sulking a little she accepted the situation and took up her indoor routine without evincing too much distress. On the third day it rained; I sanctimoniously opened the window in front of her, telling her she could go, secure in the knowledge that she had no intention of accepting my magnanimous offer.

As it happened, the rain continued for a couple of weeks, and that seemed to break up the pattern. Snoopy was certainly not too silly to stay in out of the rain, and, when it cleared and she could go out again with reasonable comfort, she lapsed back into the pattern of the previous winter and early spring, taking herself out and back occasionally, but staying in more often than she went out. I doubt that she was uninfluenced by my relief whenever she made it clear that she had no intention of venturing forth that particular evening, getting down from her meditation place in front of the open study window and taking up her indoor routine. Although I piously left the window open, and tried to refrain from showing my approval of her decision, I imagine my body signals fairly shouted it. And the rain continued intermittently, sparing us both the need to make a choice.

As usual, we went back to Newport for Christmas, which passed uneventfully, save only that Snoopy finally attained Possum Heaven (see Fig. 9). But this time, unlike her successful scaling of the wardrobe, it didn't prove to be an anti-climax.

Whenever I could get away with it, I left the door of my room at Newport open at night, to let Snoopy issue forth and perambulate the hall. The best ploy seemed to be to habitually leave it open during the day, and `forget' to close it in the evening. On one occasion, however, the door at the end of the hall, leading to the older part of the house, was also left open in the late afternoon, through genuine inadvertence.

There was no sign of Snoopy anywhere in my room, at the time she usually got up. The panic was only momentary, for I had a pretty good idea where she would have headed. I found her in my parents' bedroom, planted squarely in the middle of the biggest, softest double bed in the whole world.

She looked at me with just a touch of reproach. She always knew Possum Heaven lay on the other side of that closed door. Why had we kept it from her?

The weeks which followed our return to Ingleside were the happiest either of us had known, but it is very difficult to articulate why. They were happy because nothing happened. In writing a narrative such as this, it is the less pleasant incidents which come most readily to mind, especially the more scarifying ones. They are memorable, precisely because they are the exceptions, not the norm. Looking back over what I have

written, I seem to have given a disproportionately painful impression of Snoopy's career; certainly she had some bad times, but she had far more good times, night after night when, apart from the minor irritations of possum everyday life - and it is no freer from those than the human version - she was cosily content.

The following weeks were weeks of uneventful tranquillity. Snoopy, mature and steady, went about her business, inside and outside, and I, now reassured as to her competence, went about mine. Sometimes we visited each other's world. Snoopy would get up beside me as I worked at my desk, curious about the function of the typewriter, or pens, getting me to demonstrate yet again how they worked, then go about her own affairs, uncomprehending, but satisfied, because I had made the right gesture. Or I would go out with her, and sit beside her looking at the night, not because I was forced to go through fear that she might come to harm, as in days gone by, but just because I liked doing it, and she liked having me there.

But for the most part our companionship was confined to the area we had in common - the rain continued intermittently, and we both preferred a warm, dry house to the outside world in bad weather. She still liked to sit beside me while I had dinner, begging at least the offer of titbits so that she was part of my activity, or groom and meditate beside my feet if I watched television afterwards. And although over the last year she was more inclined to sleep under the bed or on the very end once she had performed her sleep ritual - for she still needed me as the other actor in the sleep ritual - she still, at times, curled up under the bedcover, nestled into the curve of my body.

The only slight dampener was that I was progressing towards the end of my thesis, and, on odd occasions, was too engrossed in what I was doing to notice immediately when she started her recognition ritual after she woke up or when she came in from outside - something which was bound to cause momentary consternation, until I noticed and put it right, since the purpose of the performance was for her to reassure herself that she was in the right place. And there were also odd occasions when, wanting to finish off a particular section, I, the human, stayed up too late for Snoopy, the possum, and she had to come out of the bedroom and get me, asking politely in her usual way, so that she could perform her sleep ritual and go to bed. But such occurrences were rare, and I always hastened to rectify the situation as soon as I realised my iniquitous omission.

By the end of summer, however, I began to get worried. That Snoopy should confine herself to her core territory most of the time was not particularly unreasonable or alarming in a possum her age. But it seemed to me that she wasn't going out at all. So now I consciously started keeping a closer watch on her, and what I saw alarmed me.

She was indeed not going out at all. Furthermore she was very moody, moping, even occasionally irritable and snappish. I didn't know what was wrong with her. Her general physical condition seemed fine: there were no specific symptoms I could take to a vet.

Of course I should have know what was wrong - I'd seen it often enough before. It was just pre-mating season blues, and Bindi, in the roof, had been doing the same for the last couple of weeks.

I decided she was bored, and reverted to taking her out on my shoulder, but she didn't want to come. She simply jumped off my shoulder, or came straight down the first tree I put her in, and ran back to the house. At most, she would consent to sit up a sapling for half an hour, just to please me, then - straight back in the window.

There were more physical constrictions than ever, now. I couldn't take her downstream myself, because of human territorial

exigencies; Bindi was firmly entrenched in the middle creek belt; the property upstream, hitherto deserted from a human standpoint, now acquired a temporary human resident, complete with cats, dog, goats and a baby, so, once again, while the native animals could come and go of their own accord, I couldn't go clumping through the undergrowth with Snoopy. This meant that our walks were confined to the saplings and small gums in the immediate vicinity of the house, and, as Snoopy had no inclination to go of her own accord, it served to facilitate her alacritous retreats to the house.

I gradually persuaded her to stay out for about half an hour, and make a more orderly withdrawal to the house. Then, one night, in one of the closest trees to the house, she picked up a new scent, sniffing excitedly in the fork of a branch which possums often found convenient as a chair. It was evident from her behaviour that Erik's replacement had finally arrived, and she found him to her liking.

A few nights later I actually saw him in the trees near the house, a mature male with face marking that were entirely new to me. However, he took fright at the sight of me and decamped. Later, despite efforts to the contrary, I found myself thinking of him as Charon.

After that, I expected that she would go out of her own volition, without any promptings from me, but she did nothing of the sort. So I gave up: she was the possum, she knew what conditions were like out there far better than I. So often, now, she'd been right and I had been wrong in matters concerning possums; I'd reminded her that there was a world outside the house, and it was up to her to weigh the advantages and dangers from a possum's point of view, something which she was far more capable of doing than I was.

Meanwhile, Bindi had grown markedly more aggressive - it could well have been the phase that many female possums go through in early pregnancy, presumably with an end to securing a good nest in which to raise the coming baby - and blatantly coveted Snoopy's house. She owned the roof, like Kylie before her, as well as at least one tree-nest, and usually came to the window only to collect her handout, departing at the first sign of displeasure from Snoopy. But now she started coming in the window and down on to the floor.

Naturally, Snoopy objected, and for the first week or so, after a token scuffle, Bindi departed, with a wrathful Snoopy following her as far as the window sill to speed her on her way. I saw no problem with that - it seemed to do Snoopy good to get stirred up occasionally, and play the role of established territory holder, and it certainly relieved the boredom.

However, the fights became less and less perfunctory, and more and more even. Snoopy had almost caught up with her granddaughter in size, but not quite, and the night arrived when Bindi was the decisive victor, with Snoopy fleeing into a corner as soon as I broke it up. That just wasn't on: Bindi had the roof and all outside; Snoopy had nowhere else to go. So I hoisted Bindi, and shut and locked the window behind her.

Snoopy jumped up on the shelves beside me, literally threw her arms around my neck, and Had to Have my face to kiss. Apparently, what with Bindi, and the cats, who after their taste of the highlife when Erik was occupying their room had been even more inclined to encroach on the house proper, Snoopy had begun to worry that I might let her territory be taken from her. But now she knew. And she was very, very pleased, with the outcome and the new certainty, and with me for arranging it.

On other occasions Snoopy had seemed to be saying, `thank you'. If not gratitude, at least it was the stage of emotional development before gratitude: I did something which pleased her, so she associated me with the pleasure and therefore liked me, and proceeded to show it. But I never had

such a direct response as this before.

A couple of nights later, on the 9th of April, 1975, everything changed. Snoopy was up and waiting at the window, impatient to go out, before it was anything like dark. She looked like a different possum: her nose was cherry-red, her coat was shining, her attitude was alert, and her eyes were sparkling with delight and expectation.

There was no doubt about the matter. Snoopy was in love again. And she just couldn't wait to go out and meet Him.

Other possums, if they are lucky, fall in love once in their lives, when they are still youngsters. But Snoopy, the daughter of Jenny, Snoopy, who had of all possums known a continuous gentle and affectionate relationship throughout her life, and was herself in consequence gentle and affectionate beyond her kind, Snoopy fell in love every time. It was inevitable.

Of course the time Snoopy wanted to go out was the very time she should least be allowed out. It was a very hard decision. I had a deadline to meet, and I knew I would be absorbed in my thesis that night; on other such occasions, when I knew that even the small part of my mind that was otherwise always on the alert for trouble would not be available, I had closed the window and kept her in. But it had never happened when she herself particularly wanted to go out, and she hadn't been upset by my action. This time she wanted to go very much indeed.

Then, too, there was the principle of the thing. If I kept her in this time, I would have to keep her in every time. She had obviously missed having a baby at one stage, and we couldn't hope for another male as obliging as Erik, who would come inside at Snoopy's request. In fact, the present incumbent seemed to tend towards man-shy. Snoopy was now physically fitter, bigger, stronger, more emotionally and mentally more mature than she had ever been before. And she was never likely to be more so. If she was ever to go out and mate normally, then it had to be now. Otherwise I would always have to shut her in, breaking her heart, at the very time she wanted to go out most.

I reminded myself, as I always did whenever there was any slight doubt as to whether she should go out, that if I let her go now I might never see her again. But I didn't shut the window.

She couldn't even wait until it was dark. I followed her, as far as the clump of cane which leant over the creek, near the downstream border of the property, forming a bridge connecting with the tree route downstream. I saw her safely up the cane before returning to house.

All that evening, thesis or no, I was on tenterhooks. But, somewhat to my surprise, Snoopy arrived in rather early under the circumstances, around midnight, looking as pleased as Punch. I didn't need to be psychic to read the signals. She's seen Him, all was proceeding according to plan, she'd got herself there and back without any problems, and returned to find her territory secure, her beloved house and bed and personal human all in order.

The only slight imperfection was that I insisted on working late, and she had to come and get me so that she could perform her sleep ritual and go to bed. But I went to bed nearly as pleased with the world as she was. It looked as if we'd finally solved the last of the problems. I'd made matters plain to Bindi, and would do so again if necessary, but Bindi wasn't, in any case, the sort of possum who would turn into another Kylie. And Snoopy had solved the other remaining problem: she could go out and mate, and get herself back successfully. It looked as if we had no worries from then on - I could get on with my business, and she could get on with hers, and we could enjoy each other's companionship without any more

conflicts or tantrums.

The next morning was one of those by now rare occasions when I woke up to find that I was lying on my back, and Snoopy had insinuated herself between my arm and my side, stretched out full length on her back, blissfully asleep with her head on my shoulder. I stole a little while longer in bed before I disturbed her.

She was rather disgruntled, later that day, when I disturbed her to show her to someone who wanted to see her. Normally she took that sort of thing in her stride, but this time she seemed to think she needed her beauty sleep. But she had forgotten all about it by the time she got up, far too early, as on the previous evening.

I was working at my desk, and didn't notice her attentions until too late. I came to to find that I'd done it again - there was a dejected little possum sitting up by the window. I hastened to apologise, and make good my omission, and in a minute she just Had to Have my face to kiss.

I petted her until I was sure I'd made up for my mistake, then stayed with her at the window.

Once she'd reassured herself about me, there was no room in her mind for anything but Him. It was the same as the previous night: she just couldn't wait until dark.

It suddenly struck me, as I was watching her, that she'd finally grown into a very beautiful possum, even allowing for my personal bias. I had never required it of her that she should be beautiful, any more than she was required to be supernally intelligent. She was a nice enough possum not to need that. All she was required to be was happy. But before, while she'd always had a quaint charm, she was still somehow ungainly and comical.

Now she had finally reached full size, had filled out in proportion and was in superb condition, with that extra little fillip that the excitement of the mating season gave her. And she was beautiful, by anyone's standards. She reminded me a lot of Jenny in her prime.

It also struck me that perhaps I ought to close the window in her face. The time when Snoopy wanted to go out most was the time of greatest danger. And again I ritually repeated to myself that if I let her go now, I might never see her again.

But the danger had been worse the previous night, since that was the first time she'd been out for weeks. Things are continuously changing, new dangers appearing, and I had been very worried that she might have fallen prey to one of them while her mind was on other things. But she'd come back safe and sound, proving herself competent to cope with whatever was out there.

Surely, I thought, that's enough. She got away with it last night, we shouldn't press our luck. She obviously found him, surely he can be relied on to come to her now.

But if I'd never seen her looking so beautiful, I'd also never seen her looking so happy. To shut the window would have broken her hear. I just couldn't do it.

Again the night couldn't come quickly enough for her. She wriggled with impatience, peering out excitedly, absent-mindedly chewing little on a leaf of the domestic lantana that was growing by the window which she had previously, after a few tries, declared unfit for possum consumption. Finally she could wait no longer, and went down the plank.

Again I followed her as far as the cane by the creek, and saw her safely up it. I turned back to the house, walked a few steps, and again the risk occurred to me, that I might never see her again. I wondered whether I should go with her, at least part of the way. I turned back to the cane, but she was already gone.

And this time, I never did see her again.

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It would be convenient from a literary point of view to ring down the curtain at this point, leaving the impression that Snoopy, a whole and competent possum at last, Returned to Nature in the best traditions of *Born Free*. And I should dearly love to do so, but it would be untrue. I may be writing this story, but I didn't script it, and cannot alter the facts to suit my own convenience. Possums of Snoopy's sort are not lions or otters; they have been living in association with humans for over a hundred years, that is to say something like a hundred possum generations, or a thousand human years; words like `wild' and `tame' are irrelevant, they have no meaning when applied to them.

Snoopy's story does not end there, but I have no way of knowing what part, if any, of the following truly belongs to it.

PITTWATER
Ku-ring-gai Chase
CICADA GLEN
CHILTERN RD
LANE COVE RD
MONA VALE RD
POWDER WORKS RD
Based on Gregory's Street Directory 36th Edition, Maps 81, 83, 106, 109.
Known possum group.
Group previously known or reported, no longer extant or not confirmed.
Single sighting.
Area of intensive search.
Approximate area of door-to-door search (parties beyond this).
Possum likely to be Snoopy.
Possible routes for Snoopy.
Vegetation belts.
Major roads likely to constitute a break from the point of view of a travelling possum.

5. Search for Snoopy.

FIRST DAYS As usual, I heard nothing at all alarming that night. I think I heard a possum call once, near the downstream boundary of the property. It didn't sound serious, and I half expected Snoopy to turn up shortly, having exchanged passing discourtesies with something or other on her way. But she didn't.

I was, as I have explained, engrossed in what I was writing, and I was aware of nothing else concerning possums until I suddenly realised that it was about 3 o'clock, and Snoopy was not yet back. This was not necessarily sinister, but unusual enough to mean that, given that it was the mating season, a time of potential danger, it seemed safest to press the panic button now, rather than live to regret it later. Before morning I'd trekked the length of the creek upstream, giving priority to the most immediate known danger, Mona Vale Road, starting from the far end and calling, so that if she was there and I missed her at least I was ultimately leading her away from the road and towards the house.

I confidently expected that I'd find her back at the house, as I had on previous occasions, waiting in some annoyance for me to get back so that she could perform her sleep ritual. But she was not there. It was still dark, so I went downstream to the point where I usually met her, hoping to intercept her and cut short my anxiety, if not hers.

She hadn't returned by the time it was light. I got out the bike and checked nearby, and up and down Mona Vale Road for about three-quarters of a mile either way, in case she was lying somewhere, injured. All the time hoping not to find what I was looking for, but afraid to leave even a few inches, in a drain or bushes, unsearched in case I missed it. I didn't find anything.

I knew by now that matters were serious. Given that it was the mating season, it was possible that her absence was voluntary, if not intentional. But the chances that she was in trouble were so great that it was better to risk making a fool of myself than risk letting her get too far from home, into some totally impossible situation.

In broad terms, the scenario was quite clear. There was nothing alarming or inexplicable about her going. What was alarming was her failure to return. She went out to meet her boyfriend. She followed him, as she had once tried to follow Erik, until somewhere, near or far, she met up with a situation she could not handle. If this was not immediately fatal, then she was driven farther away, where, again, she must inevitably encounter conditions with which she could not cope.

For, as a possum, she must gravitate to the same places as other possums, for the sake of food and shelter. But as a female, and a weak female, she would immediately attract the hostile attention of the females already in residence. Not two weeks before I had had to intervene to stop her granddaughter from encroaching, in Snoopy's own house. If she could not even hold her own established territory without assistance, how could she ever hope to win living space from established possums by fighting? She was bound to be chased away, ever further, hunted from group to group until eventually, sooner or later, she was killed, by a dog, by a car, by whatever.

So I started again, doing what I had the previous time. Three things had to be done simultaneously. I had to ask the people in the nearby houses, once more, to keep an eye out for her, starting with the `impossible' house where she had turned up before, and giving priority to the rest in order of geographical likelihood, regardless of whether the houses *per se* were `possible' or `impossible'. For one other basic was

clear. While Snoopy must go to the same general places as other possums, she, a weak female and ever conscious of her own inadequacy in a fight situation, would endeavour to choose a particular house where the other possums did not go, just as she had done before.

Secondly, I had to make a start on wider publicity, putting ads in the local and daily papers, and putting up notices in adjacent suburbs. There is no way of estimating how far a panic-stricken possum, out of its territory, will travel in one night. It could be yards or it could be miles. When Snoopy had been lost before it had, in a sense, been her own weakness and the injury to her foot which saved her. Her progress was slow enough for her to get over the initial panic and start thinking before she had gone too far. Even a year before she would not have been able to keep up with Charon long enough to be too far from home, or at least from a known refuge of some kind, and so to have show up in due course.

Thirdly I had to check, immediately, the most likely parts of the block at ground level, in daylight, in case she was lying injured somewhere. An injured animal will crawl into almost any available hole, confined space, or cover. So I had to check every nook and cranny along the creek belt, particularly places under rock ledges, and particularly places hardest to search, hardest to see into, since what a hurt animal wants is the safest, i.e. most inaccessible, refuge it can find. Also, on the property behind that on which we were living, as well as at various other points around the street block, there were abandoned cars, old domestic appliances, and other rubbish with innumerable cavities and holes suitable for a possum on the move to camp in. Snoopy very probably came this way to get where she ended up the first time. I had heard of possums living in abandoned cars: later I confirmed that at least one possum had camped temporarily in one of the cars towards the other end of the block. These were obviously places to be searched thoroughly. Then, too, there were old abandoned sheds, discarded water tanks, even sheets of corrugated iron, which could give refuge to a desperate, injured possum, as Erik had demonstrated.

My actions were basically the same as they had been before. But that time the coincidences were all in our favour. This time they were always against.

I had left my phone number with the people all around, and, because of the need to cover the bush personally, had had to rely on this to meet the possibility of Snoopy turning up at one of the houses - after all, last time, she'd drawn attention to herself in no uncertain terms. But my phone went out of order, not once, but twice. There were rat tooth-marks on the wires in the roof.

If I had known what the situation was I could have counteracted it in some way - once I discovered what had happened I gave my parents' number as well, at times, as that of my aunt, as an alternative. But for some perverse reason the phone went out of order in such a way that I could still make outgoing calls, while people dialling the number from outside heard the normal, continuous ringing of an unanswered phone. How this could be I do not know. It would take a telephone technician to explain how that could happen. I only know that it did.

Naturally, people were ringing up with information which was potentially vital, as I discovered later. And naturally they were indignant when the phone simply kept on ringing. They very properly assumed that, having put them to a great deal of trouble, I'd just taken off to enjoy myself on holidays on the Gold Coast, or something such.

Certainly one part of me desperately wanted to do just that. But how could I just turn my back and walk away while Snoopy was suffering

what, for her of all female possums, was the worst possible thing?

So far from running away, I couldn't even try to blot out the most painful reminders by rearranging the house. Possums, particularly Snoopy, are so thoroughly habituated to performing particular actions in the presence of particular key objects, in a fixed relationship to each other, that even a minor change is disconcerting. While Snoopy was with me, even the normal day-to-day changes in the arrangements of objects were cause for suspicion. Everything had to be sniffed, and checked, and thoroughly explored before the new arrangement could be deemed acceptable and assimilated into her daily routine. The last thing I wanted was for her to return while I was outside, worn out and panic-stricken, and find everything changed - and take off in fright, thinking that once again she was in the wrong place. I couldn't even clean it properly; in the past Snoopy, like Erik, had exhibited signs of anger and dismay whenever she found me performing activities calculated to obscure or remove her personal smell. Above all the place had to smell familiar.

I couldn't even change my hairstyle: I usually wore it in pigtails; when she was on my shoulder, Snoopy found this very convenient, as she could hang on to the reins, and it must have been one of the salient physical features by which she identified me. So that, too, was a key object.

Certainly one part of me wanted to run away, but I couldn't. And from a purely selfish point of view, what I wanted even more was the sort of comfort I'd always got before when things went wrong: the sight of Snoopy blissfully asleep under the bedcover, or happily fussing about her business round the house. But the pain I wanted Snoopy to assuage was caused by Snoopy's disappearance.

Secondly, my initial widespread publicity proved counter-productive. I knew from past experience that it would mean false alarms, particularly calls stemming from ads in the daily rather than local papers. What I did not know was that the main local paper was not delivered to precisely, and possibly only, that area where Snoopy was initially most likely to be, the street block in which our house was located and the adjacent area of the surrounding blocks. The net result was that at the beginning, when Snoopy was most likely to have still been close to home, virtually all the calls, so long as the phone held up, were coming from further afield.

As I had found by previous experience, when someone rings you to tell you they have just seen what might be your possum you must get there as soon as possible if there is to be any chance of identifying the possum. For a possum which appears in an unusual place, that is to say somewhere outside its normal territory or routine, and so attracts the attention of humans, is usually a very frightened possum. The chances are that it will take off - if the people saw a strange possum, the possum saw strange people - and never come back again. To identify that possum I had to get there at once.

If the possum could still be located, I still had to stay until it was identified. This could take hours. People seemed astonished that I could not immediately recognise my own possum, or be sure it wasn't her. But, to a certain extent, all possums look alike, from a distance, and particularly in daylight, which alters the apparent colouration. Possums are distinguishable mainly by their behaviour, their actions and attitudes which go to make up their personality. One possum terrified and hunched up at the top of a tree looks very like another possum. Even apparent size is not a true guide, since this depends so much on body attitudes, which in turn depend on mood: as I have said, I have seen Kylie apparently shrink to

literally half her former size before my eyes.[xxx]

It was a matter of seeing enough of the possum, bit by bit, to eliminate the possibility that it was Snoopy. And since the possum was in any case terrified, the last thing it was likely to do was facilitate this by coming closer. It was bad enough that it was in an impossible, frightening situation. A human who showed persistent and incomprehensible interest in it, and refused to go away, had all the earmarks of a predator singling it out as its next meal.

I knew this at the time, and I hated adding to the distress of a distressed animal. I always gave it, or left, a piece of food by way of reassurance and apology, a mere gesture I 'm afraid, to salve my own conscience. But if this animal was in distress, so was Snoopy, and she was potentially more vulnerable than any of them, because of the attitudes and personal idiosyncrasies she had acquired. Her lack of confidence when climbing, and her obvious fear of falling, meant that she habitually preferred ground travel, and so became automatically more vulnerable to dogs and cars. And her fear of other possums, based again on her consciousness of the fact that for the first years of her live she was indeed physically inferior - and this during her formative period -, and her consequent avoidance of possums and predilection for humans and all things human meant that she would go to places where dogs and cars abound.

So phone calls had to take priority, unless something more urgent was going on close at hand, and so more likely to involve Snoopy. Phone calls from anywhere possible had to take priority even over a possum safely up a tree close at hand, which I was trying to identify, as that that possum was at least temporarily in no danger, while the one further away may have been.

But there was no real way of deciding what was beyond possibility. Even from the first couple of nights the whole of Ingleside, as well as the adjacent parts of Bayview, Mona Vale, Eleanora and even the closest parts of Terrey Hills were all possible. And even further afield was not totally impossible.

I remember very well how I got a phone call from a lady somewhere around Ryde, about twenty miles away. A possum had appeared, obviously distressed, up a telegraph pole in a completely built-up area. She was very persistent. Naturally she not only wanted to help me and the animal I was looking for, she also wanted someone with some experience of such animals on the spot to help the animal in difficulties there. I had to remain adamant, and give priority to what was going on closer to home, but even so, a nagging doubt still remained.

All around the block there were parked cars, trucks and vans. It is not wholly impossible that Snoopy, worn out and frightened, curled up and went to sleep in one of them, and inadvertently hitched a ride - to anywhere. It's wild, it's fantastic, it's the remotest of possibilities and one which had to be dismissed for practical purposes. All I can say is that, seeing where these vehicles were customarily parked, under trees, near fences, near sheds, and knowing that motor vehicles are constructed so as to provide numerous cavities of a size and shape inviting to possums, and that possums sometimes do avail themselves of these facilities, and knowing furthermore how Snoopy was prone to equate things smelling of humans with safety, it wasn't <u>quite</u> as wild as it sounds.

I bless the man, whose name I never knew, who rang back later to say that he had removed the possum from the telegraph pole, and although he was unaware of my advertisement, had checked it thoroughly for injury or deformity, and so would have seen Snoopy's foot injury, before releasing it in a tree-covered area, a few hundred yards away on the map, but out of

sight and out of mind from the built-up area. The possum almost certainly was ejected from there in some mating brawl. I don't know whether that man knew all about possums, or not even the first thing, but he knew the first thing about animals and did the right thing as a matter of course.

Of course my `wider publicity' included ringing the National Parks, R.S.P.C.A., local pounds, zoos, voluntary organizations, and every vet in the district, in short everywhere Snoopy might have been taken if she'd been found by some kind person whom I had not managed to contact. Since it sometimes happens that someone, in a genuine hurry, finds an injured animal on the roads and takes it with them to their own vet or one somewhere along their route, I also tried all those along Route 33, of which Mona Vale Road is part, to a distance of about twenty miles. At a later stage, when it was likely that Snoopy, if alive, was in more built-up areas, I also tried, with the help of my mother and aunt, all the pest control firms covering the district, the licensed ones that is - the unlicensed, illegal kind who do the most harm do not, of course, advertise. Everyone, everywhere, was unfailingly kind and did their best to help. But no Snoopy.

Even the weather was against us. When I was relying on fine weather to search some particular area, it rained. When I could have used a downpour, to dissuade possums from moving from whatever shelter they were in, because I was dog-tired, or because there was something like ringing up that needed to be done inside, it was fine.

Very early in the piece I was down the creek, at the group of trees around which the next possum group was centred, where Snoopy, unbeknownst to me, had presumably been going since her recovery. I spotted a possum a fair way up a tree, and my impression was that, after about half an hour for identification, it started to come down to me. Just at that moment another possum, presumably male, appeared. A mild verbal altercation ensued. It looked like a typical courtship incident, somewhere towards the end of the process, where the female is no longer unwilling, and no-one is getting hurt. I had to leave and give priority to other, less happy possibilities, intending to return the next night if Snoopy had not, herself, returned home.

The next night there was a deluge. From the house I heard a death-scream, down by the creek. I have no way of knowing what sort of animal made it. I have heard a possum scream like that when it was torn apart by dogs, and I have heard rats and rabbits scream like that when taken by owls. Most animals in their last extremity sound the same. When I got down to the creek I found that a whole section of the bank, several feet in diameter, had been swept away. At precisely the spot where Snoopy, as always preferring the ground to difficult trees, habitually crossed. I myself could not have stood against the current that was running then in that flash flood.

The creek had always been the first thing I checked when Snoopy went missing. The thought of Snoopy drowned, or worse still trapped in one of the deeper pools, unable to get out and slowly drowning, did not appeal. I had always regarded the creek with suspicion, and was relieved when Snoopy came in one night, saturated in a way that with possums means total immersion, since it showed that she, like Kylie, could certainly swim. But nothing could have swum in the current that night.

I checked downstream as thoroughly as possible. There were snags at various intervals which seemed to be stopping all the objects of Snoopy's size, and the current scoured out all the loose soil so that when the rain stopped all the various pools and underwater cavities were clearly visible. There was nothing there. This seems to indicate that it must have been a smaller animal, but there is no way to be sure.

On top of it all, there was me. The unspoken contract between us was quite clear: she could come and go as she pleased, but if she got into any sort of trouble that prevented her from getting back, I was supposed to go and find her. And I was never more unfit for that task.

The time before I hadn't been unusually tired or worried, and I could go without sleep for the first three days. This time I was already so tired before I began that even on the second evening I had to snatch a couple of hours sleep. I was tired physically, because I was working towards the end of my thesis, and I'd been skipping sleep. I was tired mentally not only because of the thesis, but because of all the normal hassles of everyday life, which inevitably seem to cluster together, because of the constant juggling of emotional factors that was necessary to keep things running smoothly for Snoopy, because of the constant mental aerobatics necessary to reconcile Snoopy's possum world with the human world in which we, physically, lived - there was very little difficulty in persuading Snoopy to accept the human world, it was a matter of adjusting the human world to accommodate her - and, because with the end of my thesis in sight, I was wracking my brains to think of where we were going to go next, and above all how to manage things so that there could be a secure future for Snoopy.

I was tired, and I couldn't think straight.

If I had been thinking, the situation would never have arisen. I remember thinking, two weeks after Snoopy disappeared, that, given the same situation again, with foreknowledge, I still would have had to let her go. To keep her in under those circumstances would have broken her heart, it would have been a violation of trust, and a denial of everything I had ever tried to do for her. Perhaps this one occasion wouldn't have hurt. But I had no way of knowing that this night was going to be different from the night before, or that any future night would be the vital one. If Snoopy was to be kept in whenever there was any risk, she would have to be kept in all the time, as there was risk every time she went out the window. She was better off dead.

Of course, that was what I meant when I told myself every time she went out the window that I might never see her again. But by dead, I meant as quickly and painlessly as possible. That she should be thrust once again into the nightmare of running and hurting and being chased and being lost until she was exhausted, then running on again, was something I had never even contemplated. I think that if I had been offered a straight choice, I truly would have shot her first.

I was stunned. I simply didn't believe it. While I might have told myself each time she went that I might never see her again, it was really only a ritual, an apotropaic. To me, as I am afraid to her, what had happened before had faded and become no more than a nightmare. When I woke up, there she was on the end of the bed, and when she started to thresh and hiss in her sleep, there was my hand and my voice telling her over and over again that she wasn't a lost possum, she'd never be a lost possum again.

It simply couldn't happen again. The first time Snoopy was not much more than a year old. But she wasn’t a silly little yearling now. She'd been looking after herself for the best part of a year, and even the dreams had become rare. She'd got herself into trouble at times, and out of it again, without any assistance from me.

But that was Snoopy, the thinking animal. If I myself had been thinking properly, I would have remembered that for a few days a year, spring and autumn, no possum, however intelligent, thinks. It simply feels and reacts. For Snoopy to survive, at least one of us had to be thinking, and this time neither of us was.

What I should have done that night of course, was to go with her, and to hell with theses and human territorial boundaries and all the rest of it. But I didn't. And feeling guilty doesn't help in a situation like this, when you are supposed to think clearly and act.

Furthermore, the year's respite and in particular the last few weeks when Snoopy stayed inside meant that I was out of practice looking for her, and a lot of it is a matter of practice. As I explained before, we were in a typical hill-valley acoustic situation. There are cavities, little pockets caused by irregularities in the terrain, which interact as resonating chambers, so that from any given place some distant sounds seem right beside you, while others, closer in distance but originating from some sort of depression of the wrong sort, sound as if they are much further away, or are completely inaudible. In addition there are echoes to confuse the direction. It seemed to work overall according to the relative heights (above sea level) of the depressions, but without a detailed geomorphic map of the area, you couldn't predict it. You just had to learn it, identifying locations not by the direction or intensity of the sounds, but by their quality, recognising the brittle rattle of leaves from a movement in such-and-such a clump of cane, as against the softer rustling of young gum leaves, the thump of something landing on a known piece of corrugate4d iron, and so on, establishing as many fixed reference points as possible and trying to locate anything else by general direction from them. After a lull of effectively about seven months I had forgotten a lot, and, as must necessarily happen, some of it had changed. Some distinctive reference points were gone, new ones had appeared. I was out of touch.

Then, too, the sounds made by a possum, the rustlings and scrapings and little grunts, are precisely those which most suburbanite humans learn to filter out as part of the general background noise, because they have no significance for them. Over the last few months I'd not only fallen into the same habit but actually had to school myself not to react to more alarming sounds to which I would previously have jumped on conditional reflex.

To put it bluntly, there are always things getting hurt or killed. There are always screams in the night. My concern had to be confined to Snoopy: she was a possum who would not have survived without my intervention. With Snoopy contentedly scuttling up and down in the bedroom before my eyes, whatever was going on outside was nothing to do with me. I'd had to learn to mind my own business.

I couldn't `call' Snoopy. Not in the special way I referred to before, the way that works like that of a mother possum calling her baby. While I don't understand the mechanics of it, it is obviously something to do with body signals, muscle tension, tone of voice, actions and possibly scent.

I called Snoopy every whichway in the usual sense, broadcasting visual, auditorial and olfactory signals all over the area. I found out once again how the acoustics worked, and called and whistled her every night from a series of places which ensured that she could hear me if she were anywhere at all in the neighbourhood.

One of the first things I discovered was that that place where the next food group downstream customarily assembled was, from the house, one of the acoustically dead pockets. From there you couldn't hear what was going on at the house, nor could what was going on there be heard from the house. Which explained how Snoopy had got into trouble previously when she went that way, without my hearing a thing.

But the light from the bedroom window showed very clearly down into that glade. From then on I took special care to make sure that it was

on - indeed I made sure that enough lights stayed on in various rooms of the house for it to be visible, as far as possible, from any angle, and, remembering from the last time that from the Lane Cove Road side of the block the house was hidden in the creek depression, I rigged an electric lantern so that the beam shone upwards above the roof, and was itself visible, like a weak searchlight, from further away.

I even tried turning the lights out briefly - in the past this had brought Snoopy when all else failed, and it apparently meant to her, `Look out, I'm going to bed without you, and if you want to do this sleep ritual business you'd better jolly well get a move on.' I did everything I'd done before, and more.

But I couldn't `call' her in the special sense for the first vital week. After that I `called' her in earnest. But this `calling' is a real, if intangible thing, and it has a limited range, the perception of the animal being `called'. Snoopy had to be able to see or hear or smell me. Since she was a couple of months old she had always reserved the right to say, `No,' to the ordinary sort of calling, and by the time I could `call' her again in the special sense, one way or the other she was out of range.

I think now that it was sheer cowardice on my part. When Snoopy was lost before, I'd gone looking for her, getting deeper and deeper, without knowing what was ahead, but this time I knew what I was going into. I would have to do things I most certainly did not want to do. I hate approaching people, and above all annoying them with requests that involve further annoyance. I knew that some of them would abuse me and some of them would laugh at me and that I would have to explain, to explain things that even to think about made me want to cry. I hate looking at dead possums - I know that that's not just a piece of junk, and empty carton or an old sugar bag or a stray bit of car, but the remains of an individual like Erik or Kylie or Jenny or Joey or Snoopy. Previously, I confined my inspection to making sure that it was dead, with a cursory examination if one of the known locals, other than Snoopy, was missing. Now I was going to have to examine body after body, without the filter of professional detachment, rather the reverse.

Above all, I hated looking for Snoopy, hour after hour, day after day, without any hope of success. Going out to meet Snoopy under ordinary circumstances was not unpleasant. There was a tinge of anxiety, but she usually showed up before very long. This, as I knew from past experience, was quite different.

The `calling' process is a matter of body signals, and I can't fake my body signals. The nearest I could come was a species of method acting: I had to temporarily make myself believe the worst, the anxiety had to be real, to achieve the result. This was tolerable only when there was a good chance of a happy outcome. In these circumstances, on top of everything else, I just couldn't do it.

At the time I misdoubted my motives. I thought, I was worried about what I was going to do with Snoopy, and this is one solution. Perhaps I don't really <u>want</u> to find her.

I doubted my own motives in other ways, too. Was this really the right thing to be doing, or was it just the most comfortable for me? I stayed home in bad weather - in very bad weather (not just light rain) possums go out as little as possible, often not at all on the first night, and only a short trip to the nearest food sources for the next couple. Bad weather is not merely uncomfortable, it is actually dangerous, because all the normal warning signs of an approaching predator, aural, visual and olfactory, are obscured by the rain and wind and the noise they make. For the selfsame reasons, and also and mainly because of their absence, it is

impossible to find a possum under those circumstances. Even a possum who comes to your call can't come if she can't hear, see or smell anything. I knew this, but after the creek episode I began to wonder whether I wasn't staying inside because I liked my comfort. So I started acting on the principle that anything I felt like doing was automatically wrong, and went out anyway, with predictable results.

The only time I should have been out in the rain was that one night, and I doubt whether I would have been able to do anything then unless I was right on the spot. Which I certainly would not have been - if Snoopy got that far she would normally have been expected to get the last twenty yards. I would have been somewhere which seemed more important. Any other time, there were potentially more useful things I could do back at the house.

In the end I decided to accept that while my motives might be suspect, if my reasons were valid I would have to act on those reasons, regardless of whether they coincided with my wishes. But doing a Hamlet when you're supposed to be doing something else that needs all your attention and all your physical and mental energy doesn't help.

There were a myriad of lesser coincidences. Everything seemed to conspire to increase Snoopy's danger or my distress. Dogs which were normally chained at night, and so would be considered safe beyond a limited distance by possums, just happened to get loose in the wrong places on the wrong nights. A new female Siamese cat fell in love with Smiley and decided to haunt us - the incident I described earlier took place at this time. Possum's eyes show red in torchlight from a distance, and so did this cat's. I returned home one night to find a little grey animal with red eyes sitting up at the window, beside the telephone, where Snoopy used to wait for me whenever I was late. It was of course the Siamese cat.

More importantly, she made a habit of parking herself in the window Snoopy normally came in. At that time I was confining my own cats whenever I was out. Snoopy had once come in right over the top of them, but I couldn't risk an injured, frightened Snoopy trying to drag herself in and being confronted by an immoveable cat. A strange Siamese was the last thing I wanted there. Neither the owner's blandishments nor my rebuffs could dissuade the Siamese from coming. In the end I bundled her up in the birdcage I used to take my own cats to the vet, and repatriated her, and the indignity of the experience proved an effective deterrent. If Smiley wanted her, he was perfectly capable of going and visiting her at her own place.

All in all, I was very sorry for me, but I was even more sorry for Snoopy. Whatever I was going through, she was almost certainly going through far worse.

So I started again, the same way as before, going round the houses and searching the area, foot by foot, during the day, calling and searching up and down the creek at night, answering any phone calls or reports and checking the likely roads at first light. Even the previous time it was impossible to do everything effectively. But this time even the crucial immediate area had doubled. Previously, Snoopy, to my knowledge, had never gone downstream from the block on which we lived - her nose would have told her that Other Possums lay in that direction, something to be avoided until Kylie proved herself the greater menace. Now there was both downstream and upstream to search, since in a crisis she could well have been chased back into her former territory, now Bindi's.

This meant that within a rectangle of roughly three quarters of a square mile in area any place was as likely any other, and a least half of this area was effectively unknown to me. While I'd gone round it before, I'd naturally given priority to the upstream area. Upstream I at least had

a general idea of the acoustics, and of the whereabouts of nooks and crannies in which injured animals tend to take refuge. I could never do very much about the trees: as I said, there is simply no practical way of determining whether there is a possum up a given tree on a given day. But upstream I at least had some idea of where to look for those nests in which a possum was potentially detectable.

Downstream I had to start from the beginning. I had to look for places in which to look. So I did. Wherever possible I asked, and received, the permission of the owners of the land. Where there were no human residents, I'm afraid I just went: one of the things I certainly did not have time to do was check the records of land holdings and locate the owners. My apologies herewith to the owners of that land, whoever they may be.

The chances were all against from the start, but if you do not take what chance exists, then there is no chance at all.

Not only was the actual area of land doubled, there were new houses. The houses in that neck of the woods tend to be well hidden, behind trees, in depressions in the land, at the end of long, winding, barely perceptible dirt tracks. In the event there turned out to be something like forty houses in the immediate vicinity. But I had to find them first. Some had been built in the two and a half years since Snoopy went missing before; others, downstream, were particularly inconspicuous. The upshot was that there was one house, or rather adjacent shed, which Snoopy must almost certainly have been in at some time, the very existence of which I did not suspect until four weeks after she disappeared.

The people there came from all walks of life, from all economic strata, and from a variety of different countries. They were no more perfect than people anywhere else, they had their foibles and follies and disagreements. But not one, of all of them, refused to help, at least insofar as it was a matter of keeping a note of my phone number, and letting me scour their property. And some of them did a very great deal more to help.

There only one rebuff, that through ignorance, and, as it happened, by a transient.

A little upstream, on the opposite side of Chiltern Road, is the entrance to the Ingleside Boy Scouts' Camp. The camp itself is over the hill, in the valley beyond. To get there from where I was, by whatever route, was a very time-consuming business. That direction was probably the least likely, so I confined myself to visiting the houses close to the road, and gave priority to the creek area, relying on ringing the camp.

If Snoopy did in fact go that way there was a pretty good chance that she would by-pass the houses on Chiltern Road, while still in a blind panic, and go on. If she did, there was a very good chance of her going to the camp. The scouts were in residence the weekend Snoopy disappeared - I saw her last on the Thursday night - and she would have been attracted by the sound and smell of humans.

With a group of youngsters, particularly, there was a very good chance she might be rescued. It was also virtually her only chance, if she did indeed take that direction. Some of the other people I met thought their dogs would have scared her off, when in fact she was more likely to be attracted to the vicinity by their barking, something she associated with both her homes, at Newport and Ingleside. A Maltese terrier kept in the house, however ferociously it barks, or even genuinely dangerous dogs kept chained, are likely to attract a possum looking for humans, if not to themselves, at least to the property. But beyond the scout camp the dogs were for real. If Snoopy went past the camp the only way she could have

survived would be by reversing her normal behaviour patterns and avoiding human habitation by as wide a margin as possible.

Be that as it may, the possibility wasn't even tried. At this point my mother rallied to the cause, and was staying in the house intermittently for periods of several days, minding the telephone while I was doing what had to be done outside.[y] She agreed to take some of the simpler phone calls off my hands, so I left some of the calls to institutions to her. It should have been quite simple. But the gentleman who answered the phone at the Scout Camp just laughed, and proclaimed that no self-respecting possum would come within a mile of the place. And rang off. And did not take the phone number.

He just didn't know, of course. If I had spoken to him myself I think I could have at least persuaded him to take the phone number. About ten years previously, before any of this happened, I had been with a sizeable field expedition in a national park. A few nights after the camp had been established, a possum came a-scrounging, and with unerring deftness, chose to makes its presence known in the tent occupied by people who had never seen a possum in their lives. The resultant screams and squeals, together with the testy complaints of those awakened by them, and the exasperated injunctions of those more knowledgeable than I to for heaven's sake just give it a piece of bread or fruit and go back to sleep, must have been heard for miles. Joking aside, that possum may well have been a suburbanite, hand-reared or otherwise, who had been Returned to Nature and had the luck to survive, but when the noise and smell of humans, and human food, informed it of their presence, had reverted to what, for it, was nature. No doubt it was far more shocked and frightened by its reception than the inmates of the tent were by its advent. Never mind `possums don't', possums do, or sooner or later one will.

But at the time I was out searching the bush, and by the time I heard what had happened the camp was already breaking up.

And explanations take time, and time was what I did not have. Naturally people require some sort of explanation if you are asking them to do something. The easiest was where people were convinced that no possum would ever come near their particular house. In the immediate neighbourhood I had only to point to the house where Snoopy had gone the previous time. A possum who could turn up there could turn up anywhere.

More complicated were the explanations to people who, very properly, wanted to know what I had to do with a protected native animal. I would ask the same question myself under similar circumstances.

The people who understood most easily were those who were used to dogs and cats, and, like me, had a smattering of pop ethology which enabled them to understand the principle of territoriality. They knew of cases where an animal, through injury or age, is unable to defend its own territory from encroachment, but still remains a viable dog or cat in other respects. In this case human intervention is necessary to keep the territory inviolate. The animal doesn't have to be confined, except, as always, in special circumstances. It soon finds out for itself that it is politic to stay in the area under the effective control of its humans.

Other people couldn't understand the concept that a possum might not distinguish between man and his works and the bush. Because we divide the world into Man and Nature, we tend to assume that every other species

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y. In 1975 domestic answering machines were not yet a practical reality in Australia. Mobile phones were a dream for the distant future, considered by some of my friends in the sciences to be the one truly scientifically impossible element in Star Trek.

must do the same. (Of course possums are just as bad: they divide the world into possum and non-possum.) They seemed to think that it must be a classic case of a foundling animal caged from infancy, and suddenly escaping, which from my point of view was the cruellest of half truths.

There is no way of getting across just how much I hate the idea of a possum, any possum, and Snoopy above all, in a cage, a physical cage of the sort they meant. In fact it was one of my recurrent nightmares at the time, waking or sleeping, the picture of Snoopy in a real cage a couple of feet long, with wire and bars. People put possums in things like that; with Snoopy wandering among them someone could do it to her. Snoopy was in a cage, but only the same cage that all other possums are in, the cage of their own territories, the area which they can hold or which is held for them by external circumstances, whether human intervention or physical isolation, i.e. the absence of other possums in the immediate vicinity.

Those people were prepared to help when they knew her age. If an animal has been caged for the first four and a half years of its life, then whatever the rights and wrongs of the initial act, it obviously can't be fit to go off alone all of a sudden. I settled for that - I had neither the time nor the inclination to split hairs.

Elsewhere, rather than here, I was of course abused, my motives impugned, the propriety of my actions challenged. Well of course Snoopy was my substitute baby, my teddy bear, my security blanket and everything else of the sort you care to name. Any relationship, of any type, can be broken down and viewed in less than creditable terms. Every action, even the most `altruistic' of all, giving one's life for someone else, is ultimately selfish: you choose one alternative, however painful, because the other is for whatever reason even more unacceptable. Of course there was an element of possessiveness in my feelings for Snoopy. Of course I wanted <u>my</u> possum back.

But more than that I wanted her safe. I had made up my mind at the beginning, and I would have stuck to it, that if I found Snoopy by some miracle established in some even remotely possible place, I would leave the decision to her. I doubt whether I could have resisted kidnapping her and taking her back to the house for two or three days to see if she would readjust, but if she was unhappy she would go back where I found her. For purely emotional reasons I could never have lived with an unhappy Snoopy, any more than I could have broken her heart by keeping her in that night. The choice would have been hers, as it always had been, the same choice she made hundreds of times, whenever she went out the window and came back of her own accord. As far as I was concerned, circumstances had once again taken that choice away from her, and I was trying to restore it.

After all, what I had been trying to do all along was to raise Snoopy to be as viable a possum as was possible for her.

But, whatever they thought, there was no one in the neighbourhood who did not manage to see the situation in some way to which they could respond. Some asked if it was worth going through all this, but I guess the answer to that is that if you care for anything, human, animal or abstract, you run the risk of being hurt through it. It's called giving hostages to fate. There's a tried and true cliché which says that if you do not allow anything in life to mean anything to you, you will soon find that life is meaningless. Everyone gives hostages of one sort or another to fate, and so everyone was able to translate the situation into terms of their own experience.

And of course, when something goes wrong, you suffer all the pains of bereavement, of any sort. I was displaying all the classic symptoms - one minute I was sure that Snoopy was still there, I had only to

look under a chair or something, the next minute I was sure that I had imagined it all, and there never was any such animal, and the next minute I wished some natural catastrophe would obliterate the whole place from the face of the earth. Some people thought it incongruous, therefore funny, to grieve for an animal in human ways. Well, I grieve for Snoopy in human ways because I am human, and that's the only way I know how to grieve. Being decent people, they didn't laugh for long.

And here, as elsewhere, there was the odd person who understood straight away. My heart goes out to the bloke who said, meeting me later, `Have you found your little mate yet?' He'd had a similar experience, and he knew. The be all and end all of it was that Snoopy was a mate of mine and she was in trouble.

You can analyse and intellectualize and rationalize a relationship, validly or otherwise, but it doesn't alter the fact. All you are doing is identifying the ingredients in, not a mixture but a compound. In a compound, the constituent elements are transmuted, and the end product is a new substance in its own right, with its own properties, some the same, some entirely different from, those of the original elements. Sodium and chlorine are both poisonous; sodium chloride, common salt, is not.

For practical purposes, you deal with the end product. You can analyse it if you want to, as well, if your interest lies in that direction, but that is something apart. You don't say, `Ha! NaCl!' every time you put it on your egg.

I remember another person, too, who lived miles away, who went straight to the heart of the matter in the same way. After I'd told what was necessary of my story she said, of Snoopy, `How she must have loved that bed!' That, I am sure, was the crux of it from Snoopy's point of view. Never mind why she loved it, or in what particular way, she loved it, and she wanted to get back to it.

That was why I was looking for Snoopy.

From the start, there was never less than three things going on at once. Since I couldn't be in more than one place at one time I had to make decisions. I have always hated making decisions, the repercussions of which affect someone other than myself, especially if that someone were Snoopy. Now I had to make decision after decision, and every time I was wrong.

During the day, I had to be out searching the ground, going round the houses, and looking after the wider publicity all at once, as well as following up any reports. At night I had to be outside searching and calling and inside, as well, waiting for any phone calls. Even when my mother was staying at the house, attending to the phone, I still had to keep going back to check, since I don't own a two-way radio.[z]

Even within one type of activity there was always conflict. Right from the beginning I was torn between looking for Snoop and looking for a possum. The methods are diametrically opposite. Looking for Snoopy in fact meant giving her every opportunity to find me, advertising my presence as conspicuously as possible with torch, voice and food smells. Looking for a possum meant being as unobtrusive as possible, so as not to startle the animal into fleeing or freezing, at the same time listening and watching for signs of its presence. Particularly when frightened, Snoopy had sometimes taken an hour to be sure it was me there, in which case it was a matter of looking for a possum. Time and again I was torn between waiting for a possum up a tree close at hand to come near enough for identification,

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z. Mobile phones, similarly, did not exist in 1975.

and going after another possum I could hear further away, inevitably ending by identifying neither.

Even the search pattern had to be dictated by potential dangers rather than geometric logic. Remembering the times Snoopy had trailed after me, missing me - and all animals in distress tend to revert to infantile behaviour patterns - I had to make sure that all the time I was leading her away from danger, towards the house, even when I was going round the roads at dawn, since the sound of a particular engine must be even more distinctive to possums than to humans. The worst danger seemed to be Mona Vale Road.

The part of Mona Vale Road near the corner or Chiltern Road is a death-trap. Like other, even worse because unlit, sections further towards Mona Vale, it is cut off, visually and acoustically, from adjacent parts of the road by a bend, so that there is virtually no warning of an approaching car. The further reaches of the road are visible and audible, and because I know how the road runs I can predict the approach of a vehicle. To a possum which knows only the immediate area, signs from there are more likely to mean a distant potential danger, which apparently goes away when the vehicle enters the dead area just round the bend. If a car is travelling at speed, there is no immediate warning, either for the animal or for the driver. Getting across the road is a matter of luck, not intelligence. A human who did not know the area, miraculously transported there blindfold at night, could make the same mistake as the wildlife.

And that was where Snoopy went the previous time. I was horrified by that place but I couldn't keep away from it, hoping to stop her before she got on to the road. But on one side of Chiltern Road there was still sufficient vegetation, on private land and on the roadside, to hide a possum; on the other cleared land associated with the house where Snoopy turned up before; on the opposite side of Mona Vale Road was a copse of bush, shielding a row of houses behind. Snoopy could by luck have crossed either road, so anywhere I took up my position meant that there was a danger of luring her across from the other side.

One night, at dusk, when I was trying to at least see out the peak-hour rush - at that time of year it coincides with the time when possums get up, hungry and not completely orientated, and especially vulnerable - I was standing on the opposite side of Chiltern Road from the cleared land, that is to say the opposite side from that on which the creek and house were located. I thought I detected a movement on the opposite side of the road, in answer to my call. I moved to go across. Just at that precise instant, a car swung wildly round the corner from Mona Vale Road, on its way to the Scout Camp. The driver apparently miscalculated in regard to speed and the sharpness of the turn, a very common occurrence there. I thought there was an impact. I searched what I thought was every inch of ground, including all the brush, but found nothing. I hoped it was a lucky near miss. Nothing was to be found on the other side of the road either. After that I kept away from the corner at night.

Some of the details of the subsequent search are mercifully blurred in my mind, so I will stick to the main lines.

One night roughly three nights after Snoopy disappeared, somewhere around midnight, I was at the house alone, on the veranda. I had found that, given that there was no way to hear what was going on in all directions because of the fluky acoustics, this was the place where most of the central area could best be covered by ear. From the direction of the light scrub along Lane Cove Road, further towards Mona Vale Road, and on a route which Snoopy might well have taken the previous time, I heard a possum call. It sounded like a female telling a male, with not too much venom, to

be off. At the time I was sure it was Snoopy's voice.

What this actually means is that it was a possum with the same chest capacity as Snoopy, that is to say, comparatively large and probably female. To me, possums' calls are not as distinctive as dogs' barks; I can only at best say that it's a large rather than a small possum calling if I don't see it. And in any case I had very rarely heard Snoopy call in that manner.

I took off in the direction of the sound and got entangled in the hakea belt running towards Lane Cove Road. By the time I got to the approximate position of the call there was nothing to be heard or seen. I waited for, I think it was about, half an hour before, inevitably, starting to worry about what was happening not only at the house but in the creek depression, which was out of earshot from there. So I returned to the house, stopping and calling as I went, trying to lead Snoopy home. I was really convinced that she would be back in an hour or so, or at least get far enough to start recognising the landmarks on the block next door. But she didn't.

The next day I went over as much of that light scrub band on the Chiltern Road side of Lane Cove Road as I could, without finding any trace of a possum. Although, as everywhere in that entire area there were abandoned car bodies and suchlike things, in this case put there by the owners of the land themselves, things which provided inviting cavities for possums to camp in, I found no possums. At dusk, which is the time when possums are comparatively easy to spot, I waited for about half an hour. But I had had a report from Terrey Hills, which also required my presence there at dusk. In the end I split the dusk period between them. Obviously this means there is a good possibility of losing both, if the possum at the first site is a late riser, while that at the second is an early riser. Snoopy in the house had been an early riser for the obvious reason that it got dark earlier inside than outside, but I had no way of knowing whether the habit would have carried over into the present situation.

In the event, the possum at Terrey Hills was still around when I got there. While I never got close enough to make an absolute identification, after a few hours I had seen enough to be virtually sure that it wasn't Snoopy, and there wasn't anything seriously amiss. While I was there, light rain started to fall, gradually increasing in intensity. By the time I got home it was coming down in torrents - I think that was the night I heard the cry by the creek, which belongs to an entirely different reconstruction.

It rained for a few days. A week after Snoopy disappeared, Charon came back. But he didn't bring her with him. He appeared to be coming down a belt of vegetation just beyond the downstream boundary of the block we were on, connecting the creek with the lighter scrub near Lane Cove Road (see Map, fig.).

A few days later a very kind man rang up from a house near the belt of scrub running along the Lane Cove Road side of the street block. A possum had just appeared, in broad daylight, sitting on top of an old car body in the back yard. I took off, but when I got there, there was no possum to be found, on, in or under the car, or anywhere around. But there were patches of very dense scrub nearby, of the brittle sort which rattles at the slightest movement. It would have taken days to search it, and the possum, hearing me coming, would have panicked and kept moving further and further. By the same token, it would have taken a very, very fly possum indeed to leave the area without being detected if I myself waited in absolute silence.

So I got some supplies, put out a selection of the most aromatic

of Snoopy's favourite food, and settled down to wait. But at dusk light rain started to fall, not heavy at first, but enough to stir the leaves, covering any noise that would be made by a stealthy departing possum. So I alternated between waiting and listening and calling and scouting around, to no effect.

While I was sitting listening I heard an impact from a point further down Mona Vale Road, towards Mona Vale. It was one of those instances of fluky acoustics I mentioned before: this spot near Lane Cove Road connects with that particular sound pocket on Mona Vale Road. I started to go to investigate, but checked myself. So often before I had lost track of a possum I was investigating by going off after a false alarm further afield. The impact could have been caused in any way, a minor collision, something falling off a truck, someone hitting a bump too fast so that the car jumped, or striking a piece of the inanimate junk which perpetually litters Mona Vale Road, or even if it were an animal being struck, it could be any sort of animal, let alone a possum, let alone Snoopy. I made up my mind that this time I would stay with what was, *a priori*, a much better chance. It was perfectly plausible that Snoopy could have followed Charon this far and then lost him, or, if she were the possum I heard calling, lost him further down the same belt of scrub, towards Mona Vale Road, and back-tracked. At this stage it was dusk, and peak hour, and her failure to appear could mean no more than that she was frightened, and, as usual in such circumstances, being hyper-cautious.

But no possum, of any sort, put in an appearance. And the rain got worse. I was absolutely determined to stick it out this time, and I did, getting as much as possible of my body into the battered car chassis. I waited until possum bed time and then went home, leaving the food behind me. Even if Snoopy were deliberately hiding from me, rather than simply taking fright, she might come back to the food. If she went to that house she would be among friends.

The next day I back-tracked through the scrub belts. It looked very promising indeed. There were dead cars and assorted junk scattered about in places, and in one of the cars I found droppings, signs of where a possum had been camping. This was down further towards Cicada Glen Road, in yet a third band of lighter scrub, separated from the creek belt by only a short stretch of long grass. There looked a distinct possibility that Snoopy followed Charon to the group downstream, then they had come up the furthest connecting band of vegetation to the scrub along Lane Cove Road, and worked perhaps as far towards Mona Vale Road as the spot where I heard them squabbling, then back the way they had come. By the sound of what I heard, the mating had taken place and the affair was almost over. Somewhere there they had parted company, Charon returning to the creek by way of the central connecting belt of vegetation, leaving Snoopy, alone and thinking properly for the first time in days, lost and unaware of the way home. The heavy rain which fell the night after I heard the call would have washed out any scent trails left, by the simple method of washing away whatever they were on.

But there were still no takers for the food I had left.

The following day, as I remember, I grabbed a couple of hours' rest in the morning, having been out searching and calling in the light scrub all night and as usual scoured the roads at dawn. In the afternoon I went down to Mona Vale for supplies, intending to renew the food at the car when I got back.

At that time the shoulders of Mona Vale Road were being graded, something I'd been keeping an eye on, so as to anticipate it in searching the roads. But on the way back, as a matter of duty, I stopped and asked

one of the men whether he had seen any possums around, dead or alive. At first he thought it was a joke, but when he said he had, he soon saw that it was not a joke to me, and he wasn't the type to carry a joke on his part too far.

He'd noticed a body in a particular spot the previous morning, that is to say, the possum was killed some time on the night I was waiting near the car, twelve days after Snoopy disappeared. It was lying just off the edge of the road, under a tree. He took me to the place, and there was no body there. He thought perhaps he might have been mistaken, there was a similar spot a little further down towards Mona Vale. But there was nothing there either.

All he could remember about the possum was that it was a `big' one. Whether an animal is big or small depends on the size you are used to. When we advertised once for a lost dog, a substantial labrador, describing him as `big', we got calls about dogs ranging in size from a Kelpie to a St. Bernard. In the context of most of the possum groups in the district, Snoopy would probably have been a `big' possum; she would have probably been just under two feet from the tip of her nose to the base of her tail, and would have weighed around nine pounds. In terms of most of the ones I've seen that's a reasonable size, but most people see only their local groups, so compared with a group of Foxy-sized possums it would definitely be large, but compared with a group where the males were Erik's size, or with the odd one who looks to be about three feet that I've encountered, she would have been small.

All it meant was that there was a general probability that it was a female, about Snoopy's size.

I must have passed right by the spot where that body lay, at walking speed, on my bike, stopping to check all the concealed depressions and drains. But somehow I'd missed it. So I went back over every inch of the vegetation within a few feet back from the drain, an unmade stormwater channel, on foot. There was no body.

Possum bodies, as I know only too well, disappear for a wide variety of reasons, and in innumerable ways. But one way, probably the least frequent but by no means unprecedented, is that the corpse sometimes walks away of its own accord. I have seen too many `dead' possums, with *rigor mortis* set in in some cases, subsequently make a complete recovery. By this time the man was gone beyond recall, and he had mentioned no specific injuries. A possum lying off the road is usually one that has been thrown by a glancing blow from a passing car, not one that has been run over. While the majority no doubt die instantaneously, or virtually so, there are plenty of known instances where this is not the case.

So far as my knowledge went, there was a chance of a badly injured animal lying somewhere nearby in the bushes. The area was far too large and well-covered to search immediately, it would have taken days if not weeks. So I had to bank on the hypothetical possum being either very badly injured, and somewhere in an obvious hideout nearby, or only badly shaken, in which case it would probably make for the ridge some distance back from the road. There is always a slight ledge running along such outcrops just above ground level, sometimes forming larger overhangs which could be termed rock shelters. I knew from past experience that this is precisely where injured or ill animals take refuge and die.

After a quick trip back to the house I covered as much of this as I could, in the area near the two supposed find-spots, particularly the first and most likely one. At sunset I settled down to listen for movements.

This proved to be impossible. With dusk came the peak hour, and

the noise drowned out any sounds such as those which would be made by an animal in the brush. Whereas I usually called and waited in one place for an hour, all I could do was call, more softly, aimed at closer range, and wait in one place for about half an hour, then move a short distance, for fear of calling Snoopy, if it were Snoopy, into danger. But while the peak hour traffic was going I doubt whether I could have been heard any more than I could hear. All I could do was watch and wait for the traffic to stop.

It was far worse even than the corner of Chiltern and Mona Vale Roads. It was a stretch that was as nearly as possible insulated auditorially and visually form the surrounding parts of the road - there seemed to be an acoustic connection back towards the place where the possum had appeared on the car, but the adjacent parts of the road were completely cut off. Furthermore, it was unlit, and a high speed zone - later a lower limit was imposed towards the end of it, where a crest and blind corner cut it off from the rest of the road towards Mona Vale, but at the time everyone seemed hell-bent for home. And of course there was the usual array of tempting food morsels spread along the side of the road - bait. I got rid of all I could.

Theoretically that should have caused an animal thinking of crossing to pause on the dirt to eat before going on to the surfaced road, helping it to avoid rushing under a car. But every so often there would be a line of cars travelling at a reasonable speed towards the crest - there of course, there is an unbroken double line - and someone would decide it would be fun to overtake the lot. It didn't matter even if the lights of the car approaching from Mona Vale were already visible over the crest, or sometimes even if the car travelling in the opposite direction was itself visible. With three cars abreast on a two-lane road, those travelling legally had no option but to go off on to the dirt. Any pedestrian, of any description, on the dirt verge, would have no chance. There would have been nothing the driver could do, even if he saw it. The speed at which this sort of thing happened and the lack of space meant that he had all he could do to look after himself. The line of traffic was usually going at somewhere around 80 k.p.h. when our daredevil friend decided to pass.

Some human is going to be killed there by this nightly ritual. But I doubt whether it will make any difference. All the double lines and speed limits and warning signs in the world are useless if people refuse to take any notice of them.

Eventually the traffic thinned out, but it never really stopped. I was in a quandary about the road. I, and the supposed body, were on the same side as Chiltern Road, but there is no doubt as to the direction any suburbanite possum there would have been taking. On the side I was on there was scrub and trees, with no visible houses. On the other, the land dips away sharply, on one direction sloping continuously to the coast, where the lights of Mona Vale and Warriewood are clearly visible; in the other the land drops away to another part of Ingleside, mixed residential and small farms, then slopes up again to the ridge which divides Ingleside from Eleanora, with houses all along the slope, their lights clearly visible from where I was, and appearing much closer, in terms of travel, than they actually are, since they are on the same level on the opposite side of the valley, with the depression between invisible. For a frightened possum the first refuge is the nearest tree, but after this, suburbanites head for houses; exiles from the coastal suburbs also have familiar sound and smell of the sea, clearly visible by day, to guide them.

The possum, if in fact it had moved of its own accord, could well have got across the road, in the same direction it was already going, by luck, in a lull in the traffic. But every time I thought it was safe to

start calling, another car would come.

The traffic eased off a little after the first rush, but built up again later in the evening. It wasn't until about one o'clock that there started to be longish breaks. I heard and saw nothing beyond insects and the odd small bird stirred from its sleep. The cars kept coming at intervals, mercifully more slowly, throughout the night, starting to increase in frequency again just before morning.

I kept moving about within a small area, staying and calling softly in one place from between half an hour to a an hour at a time. By this time I'd followed Snoopy through the bush often enough to know the sort of routes she chose: her predilection for established tracks when the going through the vegetation was tough, what sort of vegetation she would consider difficult, where what looked to human eyes impenetrable jungle was in fact easy going for something her size because she was below the level of entanglement; where there would be an above-ground route easy enough to tempt her. I'd picked up a lot about the principle of the passage of least resistance from her. Since it was Snoopy I was looking for I tried to concentrate on the sort of ways she might go.

Just before morning I was slightly up the slope behind the road, on the most likely route by which Snoopy would have come. Light rain had started to fall and I was tired, so I lay down on the ground. I literally couldn't believe my eyes.

From the eye level of a grounded possum, the road itself was quite invisible. There were no lights, and trees on both sides. All that could be seen were continuous tree-tops. The house-lights on the other side of the valley were out, and only a single light was visible. It is actually a large floodlight of some description near the top of a ridge miles away, but from where I lay it shone through the trees exactly like the light from the bedroom window, seen from the downstream area where she had gone.

I had no doubt then, and I have no doubt now, as to what Snoopy would have done if she ever came to that place at that time of night, in the rain, which had been falling the previous nights. Everything was right. The sound of the rare cars was completely masked by the rain, and their headlights, as they came up the slight rise, hit the trees beside the road like a flashing torch. For Snoopy, lost, worn out and desperate, there would have been no doubt. Here at last was her house again, there was I coming out with the torch to meet her. She would have run towards that light.

I can only hope that if it was Snoopy she was running too fast to know, when she hit the road, that once again she was wrong. But if the impact I heard from Lane Cove Road had anything to do with it, then she must have stopped at the road and spent a terrified day in the bushes before making a wild dash for the house-lights as soon as it was dark - and peak hour.

It seemed that everything I had ever tried to do for Snoopy had rebounded. But even then I could not regret teaching her to come to my torch. If it killed her then, it had saved her many times before.

There was no way I could ever road-train her without exposing her to the very danger I was trying to avoid, habituating her to places where the danger was acute. I had tried my best from a distance: whenever we were out at night together, and a car passed in the distance, I'd shuddered and frozen, and evinced every sign of fear I could think of to try to tell her that those things were dangerous. But Snoopy just thought I was silly, panicking at nothing, like a ring-tail. She knew that those lights, and that noise, whatever they were, would come no closer.

If she realised what they were at all, she had no reason to fear

them. She had travelled in a car at night a couple of times, and thoroughly enjoyed it. After her initial fear, it had been a very useful, convenient, moving box. She could see out and watch all the interesting things we passed, at the same time being protected by the glass from any possible danger. The only problem was to stop her from transferring her attentions to Mumma-in-control, climbing on his shoulder and sniffling in his ear, trying to point out features of special interest as we passed - `Isn't it exciting! Isn't it interesting! Isn't it good!'

The communications between us always depended on one party giving the other party every chance to work out the situation to which attention was drawn for herself, and on the other party correctly assessing the situation. There is no way in which I could get that message across to Snoopy. It is even possible that she might have tried to stop a passing car or motor-bike, expecting to be taken to a place in which she wanted to be.

Over the next few days I checked the whole are thoroughly, day and night, looking particularly to see if there was a plausible route for Snoopy to get there.

There was. In the first place the spot where the man had indicated he'd seen the body was not far from the place where I found the body of the juvenile male that looked like Rikki. In the second place, there was no other extant possum group closer than ours, in terms of possum routes rather than geometry. And in the third place I could backtrack a perfectly feasible route to a point in Lane Cove Road nearly opposite where I had heard a possum calling at the beginning. Lane Cove Road, at that point, was a possum non-event. Unlit, with bush on either side, it was simply an open space they might tend to avoid, but would have no hesitation in crossing if need be. It didn't help that on the way I found a small gum, one of Snoopy's fads, with just that part of the leaves that she normally chose nibbled. There were seedlings springing up everywhere, so there was plenty of food even at ground level. Whatever happened to Snoopy, she didn't starve.

There were problems with the scenario even then. It was all speculation. I have known much sounder reconstructions, one in particular, later, to disintegrate at the touch of an external factor. Even at the time I was fully aware of this.

In getting from the area down the creek to the point in the belt of light scrub along Lane Cove Road, unless she failed to mount any rocks or rises, and go up any trees at all, and, furthermore, stuck to a circuitous and unlikely ground route a few feet wide, she could not have failed to see the house lights. But she may not have recognised the house from that direction, and, in any case, if she and Charon were still courting, she might not have cared at that stage. To get from there to Mona Vale Road, and miss all the houses nearby, particularly the one she went to the previous time, meant that she would have had to pass two separate houses, well apart, late at night when the house-lights were out. But there had already been coincidences enough to make this seem no barrier. There was also the matter of the possum at the car, which could not have been the same possum killed in the impact on Mona Vale Road, not because of actual distance, but because of distance combined with the route it needed to travel to get there. In the light of the other evidence it seems likely that the possum at the car was the ineluctable Charon, who had plenty of time to get there after his appearance at the house. He, presumably, knew where he was going, while Snoopy would be wandering.

For the next few days I haunted that area along Mona Vale Road. It was impossible to search every inch thoroughly, but I searched all the obvious hiding places. All I found was the skull of a cat.

At night I went back, staying in each of the folds of the hill in turn. All I saw was cars performing their nightly ritual of machismo. It was a dead place. The only sign of marsupial life was a ring-tail calling, once, further down towards Mona Vale. A couple of weeks later there was a dead ring-tail on the road near the spot from which the sound had come.

Naturally I made every effort to find out what happened to that body. I didn't want to find Snoopy dead, but I knew it would have been better for me if I were sure, and put an end to the whole horrible business and started again. Furthermore, while this was going on, I was a nuisance not only to myself but to other people, whom I found it necessary to pester for information or help.

The two possibilities seemed to be that either a dog had taken it away and eaten or buried it, or it had been removed by a human for some unknown purpose. I pestered anyone who might legitimately have taken the body away for the next week or so. Quite apart from practical considerations, there were things I would rather did not happen to Snoopy, even dead.

It doesn't, of course, really matter what happens to a body. Animals know that. I remember seeing a dog in the presence of the body of a bitch, quite possibly one he knew when she was alive. He wasn't horrified, or even at all interested. It was - just a nothing. And he was right.

But I lack the salutary pragmatism of that dog, and one thing I do not want to do is meet Snoopy again, stuffed and mounted in a museum.

In the end I eliminated all the legal possibilities. (It is, of course, an offence to remove the body of a native animal except under certain circumstances.) It is unlikely that someone from nearby buried the body without telling me. People certainly did refrain from telling me about unpleasant possibilities from a misplaced sense of kindness, but I always found out from someone else, later, usually after the animal had disappeared and when there was no chance of identification one way or another. The people around knew that I was still looking weeks later, and they were not the sort of people who would have allowed this to continue through inaction - they would have put me out of my misery. All that was really left was the possibility of a passer-by picking it up casually as a souvenir, or for the illegal fur trade.

Snoopy, of course, had a superb pelt when she left. The combination of good and varied food, living in the house, good general health and the extra fillip given by the mating season meant that, partiality aside, I have never seen a possum with a better coat of fur. I used to tease her about her fur coat, threatening to have it off her. She, of course, did not understand the words, only the bantering tone, and responded accordingly. But the words were words to me. As far as I was concerned, she needed that coat. She had to battle so hard to get it in the first place.

When I first checked the ground along the edge of Mona Vale Road, the afternoon I heard about the body, I looked for dog tracks. In the places where the body was most likely to have been, the soil appeared to be holding tracks from at least the previous day, and there were no dog tracks close at hand. To reach the body without leaving any sign, a dog would have needed a neck like a giraffe. But if the body had been even a few feet away the ground around was covered with vegetation of a type which would have shown no signs that I could recognise. So that possibility could not be eliminated.

It occurred to me that if my informant was even a day out, then the body could have been covered or moved by silt washed by the rain. I

nearly left that alone as too wild a possibility, but finally decided that, however mad or insane it might be, I was better off knowing, at least that it wasn't so. Only the top layer of wash, the latest, could have been relevant. I'm supposed to be an archaeologist, and that sort of thing is archaeological kindergarten stuff. It took me about twenty minutes to eliminate that possibility, too.

EMPTY NESTS

The Saturday two weeks after Snoopy disappeared, I was returning from a shopping expedition, and, as I was turning the corner of Mona Vale Road into Chiltern, I thought I saw something in the middle of the road, in the loose gravel which collects there every few days from the combined wake of vehicles turning in four directions.

I went back and checked, and sure enough it was what remained of the body of a possum. It looked, incredibly, like an old body: little more than the skin from the torso, the fur worn off in places, and part of the skeleton remained. All one could tell was that it had once been a grey bushy-tail. I saw all too many dead possums at this stage, but only two where the hind feet were too mutilated to make an identification, one way or the other. This, of course, was one of them.

How that body, or rather skin, in that condition, came to be there at that time I do not know. It was not there the day before, and there had not been enough traffic in the interim to account for its state if the possum were killed during the night. All I could think of was that it was somehow connected with the impact I'd heard that night two weeks ago. I'd searched then, but it is possible that I missed it, and the sides of Chiltern Road had been graded since.

But, whatever the vagaries of road grading, there didn't seem to be any possibility that this was the same body that disappeared from further down Mona Vale Road. Discounting the cry from the creek, Snoopy now had two plausible, but separate, bodies.

That's one too many. It should have made me more certain that she was dead, but, after a few days, it had the reverse effect. Somehow the fact that she couldn't be both made it emotionally, if hardly logically, more likely that she was neither.

Mona Vale Road is an appalling charnel-house where animals are concerned, but not every animal which tries to cross is killed. Some succeed, purely by luck. I had, of course, gone round all the nearest houses down Mona Vale Road, where Snoopy would turn up if she were alive and relatively unharmed, on our side, as well as those on the same side towards Terrey Hills, with no success. If Snoopy were dead, there was nothing I could do for her, but if she were alive it was likely that she was still being driven from group to group. And if she was alive, it began to seem that she must have crossed Mona Vale Road, and be somewhere in the part of Ingleside adjoining Eleanora on the other side.

So I started going door to door on that side of the road. Having found that even in the same street block we were in this took an enormous amount of time, particularly when I had to write my phone number and Snoopy's description as I went - I had thought there were about twenty houses, but in fact it was more like forty - I now started writing out cards with phone numbers and a description *en masse* before I left. The area was obviously more densely settled on the other side of the road, but always it turned out to be even more than I anticipated.

As I had expected, there were possums sighted everywhere, in unusual places, in unusual circumstances. It was, after all, the mating season. Everywhere there seemed to be reports of a possum which might or might not be Snoopy, behaving in some way that sounded like Snoopy. Always there had been the opportunity to determine whether or not it was Snoopy

from the hind feet, but always the possum appeared at a house where the people hadn't seen my ads. - the people in the house either side had, but of course the possum didn't go there. People naturally don't look at the hind feet of a possum unless they have special reason to do so. It is the intriguingly man-like front paws, with their overtly `human' movements which catch and hold the attention. Always the possum came to the window, walked in the door, tried to attract the attention of people in, the middle house. Always about three days before I arrived. And always there was a body nearby to go with the sighting, no longer where it was seen a couple of days before, vanished and unidentifiable.

And always someone said, `Yes, I saw the body and I thought about your ad., but I didn't want to let you know in case it was the one you were looking for.' Not only there, but everywhere I went. It's no good saying, `Please don't' to the few people who deliberately hurt humans or animals for kicks - it only adds an extra delicious jolt. But when people are trying to be kind, and do the wrong thing by mistake, it doesn't seem out of place to tell them the truth, so that someone else won't inadvertently be hurt the same way.

Please don't deliberately conceal things like this from people looking for lost animals. If they are looking for an animal then they are concerned about it. It must be obvious from what I have written so far, that as long as the animal's fate is unknown, every horrible, gruesome thing which happens to any animal that could possibly be yours is, for you, happening to your animal. And you live through it with them each time. Every nightmare is possible until you know the truth. Furthermore, the chances are that if people are really looking for an animal they will find out what you have so kindly and carefully concealed from someone else, later, when there is no way of knowing whether it was their animal or not.

I know that people do this from the very best motives. They didn't want to distress me, and they didn't want to see me distressed. But it really is `better to know'.

Similarly but harder. Please don't remove the bodies of animals killed on the road, at least until someone looking for them has a reasonable chance of getting there. The best course seems to be to move the body off the road itself so that it won't be mutilated further, but leave it in a prominent position.

Thirdly, some people, again from the very best motives, try to `prepare you for the worst' by pointing out all the various grim possibilities. I can only speak personally on this, but I think that anyone looking for a lost animal would be well aware of the dangers it faces - that's why you go looking for them. For as long as I have been involved with possums, people have been telling me all about the various ghastly things which happen to them.

It is seldom done with malice, rather it is simply a matter of making polite conversation. When the word `possum' occurs they feel they ought to have something to say on the subject, and so they say the first thing that comes into their head, almost invariably something unpleasant.

I know very well that even adult possums are not free from the dangers of owls and other birds of prey. I know that dogs often kill them, and cats sometimes do, but more often blind them and leave them to wander helplessly - Mephistopheles `told' me that. I know that people catch them and use them alive for blooding greyhounds, shoot them for sport, poison them with substances which cause hours of conscious agony before they die, because they are being a nuisance, and kill them by whatever means for their skins. I know that in New Zealand they are unprotected, because they are imported exotics, not native fauna, and in some quarters it is considered

both good fun and a public benefaction to impale them with pitchforks on sight. I know that in Sydney there are those who consider it a good Friday night's entertainment to get the car out and kill a few possums or cats - that is, by deliberately running them down. I know that others think it highly amusing to make friendly local possums drunk by steeping their bread in alcohol or a solution of sleeping tablets, then watch their staggering antics. And wonder why the possum doesn't come back next night - it's dead, of course. Possums are extremely susceptible to all sorts of drugs, and even if it survives the drugs themselves, its life depends on walking a very precarious tightrope over dangers, and to live it needs to think clearly. Hilarious. I know that well-meaning people trap them and Return them to Nature, because possums naturally occur only in zoos and national parks, never in the suburbs. And if any of the more sophisticated refinements in cruelty were novel to me, it hardly altered the case. I knew the world at large is no place for a possum like Snoopy who equates humans and things human with safety. That was why I was looking for her.

At the same time I was following up any response to my previous publicity, as well as going back over the block we were in. Initially I had been able to make only a cursory search of the most likely places, and in any case if Snoopy were on the move she could well have ended up in one of the places I'd searched before she got there.

I searched nearly every inch of the property we were on, as well as part of those on each side, some of it, where there was dense vegetation, on hands and knees. I found plenty of signs of possums, of course, some of which could be interpreted equally as signs of something quite horrible, or the aftermath of a non-serious squabble. And at night, when I had nothing more specific to do, I went down along the creek belt.

All I seemed able to find was Bindi, sitting on a branch above my head, glaring at me. She, of course, together with young Snug, had gone into an Empty Nest reaction a few nights after Snoopy disappeared, and departed the house for one of her tree nests. I don't blame her. I felt like doing the same myself.

Naturally, in her mind, some suspicion also attached to me, as a permanent resident of the Empty Nest - part of the fixtures, so to speak. And my behaviour only helped to confirm her worst suspicions. When you are looking for something, for whatever purpose, your body signals are those of a hunter. Here I was persistently tracking down noises in the trees and finding Bindi at the other end of them, in other words, persistently hunting her.

It was at this point that there occurred an incident to which I have already referred. I was aware that there was a possum living in the trees slightly upstream, but, although I suspected Bindi and Snug, I had been unable to confirm this. Over a couple of nights I worked out the location of the nest within a few trees - each time I'd wait at sunset and hear something starting to move a little way off without being close enough to see it before it saw me, and either froze till I left or slipped quietly away when I was looking in another direction. So the next night I'd take up position closer to where the sound appeared to come from until one night, twenty yards or so upstream, I heard a possum sneeze about ten feet away. I had it trapped. The lower vegetation around there was the sort that rustles at the slightest movement, and when the possum moved, still invisibly, so did I, waiting for it to show itself.

I thought I was right on top of it when there was a sudden movement off to the side, about ten feet away. There was a possum, perched conspicuously on a low branch, just out of reach. I was puzzled, because I had been sure that the possum I was tracking by ear had gone in the other

direction. But I assumed I had been wrong, and turned my attention to the one I could see, who was far from enthusiastic about letting me get close enough to be sure of its identity.

After a considerable amount of time and effort, I finally established that it was Bindi. But I still wasn't entirely convinced. I felt certain that the possum I had been trying to get a look at had been off in the other direction, and that it couldn't have got from where I'd last heard it to the position where Bindi appeared without being seen, or announcing its progress through the undergrowth as clearly as if it had. So I scouted around a bit more, and, sure enough, over in the direction where I'd heard the sneeze, by this time right at the top of the tallest tree in the vicinity, was a very small, very frightened, slightly pregnant-looking possum.

Naturally it wouldn't come down to be inspected. But I have no doubt that it was Snug, and that I'd fallen for the same old trick Mrs. Poss played with the dog when she, too, was protecting a juvenile daughter. There was no other possum in the world for whom Bindi would have taken what from her point of view was such a risk.

If Bindi's darkest suspicions were confirmed by incidents like this, those of the other inhabitants of the creek vegetation were thoroughly roused.

Assimilation and Alienation

Until now I'd been accepted by the other animals, ring-tails, bandicoots, bushrats, whatever, as simply another one of the known local animals. Torch, calling, clumsy movements and all, I was just something of a nuisance, but harmless, something which could be ignored. My initial passport had been a possum on my shoulder, and that had ensured acceptance. I had legitimate business, which was not with them, and it would have showed in my attitudes and actions, my body signals. Furthermore, it was the kind of business which was comprehensible to them. If, particularly at the beginning, I raced around with a great deal of commotion, broadcasting `lost baby' signals in all directions, then in due course the `baby' appeared in answer to them, one of the local known bushy-tails. What precisely they made of it, I don't know. Perhaps the more intelligent ones, if they thought about it all, decided I was a new giant sort of brush-tail, and Snoopy a commensurately large baby.

In any case I had legitimate, understandable business, and it was not with them. If I went towards a noise made by one of them by mistake, it caused no more than the usual brief alarm occasioned by any movement - or for that matter cessation of activity, as when the crickets stop chirping - on the part of any creature. They had only to hold still and let me identify them - they, of course identified me all the quicker because of my characteristic ruckus. Once this was achieved, I would go on my way, and I was something they could afford to ignore again with impunity while they got on with their own business. So they did.

If I was tramping about calling and waving torches, I was all the more easy to identify. If I sat still, I became part of the integrated alarm system of the area. If one animal takes fright, then everything else in the vicinity is immediately on the alert, at least until the cause of the alarm has been identified as nothing that need concern the individual in question. As Mrs. Poss and Snoopy `said' so often, after pricking up their ears and freezing momentarily, `That? Oh that's only a ring-tail - they panic over nothing at all.' An extra set of ears and eyes, belonging to a known non-predator, is always welcome rather than the reverse. My presence, if anything, was reassuring as long as I behaved in my normal manner. It was one of the innumerable things which signified that all was as usual and all was well.

Suddenly, inexplicably, I'd changed. I think that any animal which communicates by, and acts on, body signals must in some sense be empathetic, if that word can be shorn of its psychic connotations. Distress begets distress. My distress was evident to them, and that alone would be enough to upset them, at least until they could identify the cause of my distress and reassure themselves that it was nothing to with them. Which of course they could not.

There is a metaphysical poem which begins, `They flee from me that sometime did me seke'. The conceit is that tame deer shun their erstwhile human friend who is inconsolably heartbroken at the loss of his love. I think those must have been real deer, and the poem inspired by a real incident.[aa]

Moreover, I was of course going after every sound, even those I would normally have ignored, refusing to leave them alone until I had identified the animal which made it, or until it fled noisily, frightening everything within earshot. And I tried every trick in the book to get a look at it. Any furtive movement is always cause for alarm: it betokens a predator, or a victim which has spotted one. And any inordinate, inexplicable interest in an individual animal, any undue scrutiny, means that the observer wants something of it, from its point of view most frequently its next meal.

From just another innocuous inhabitant, I had suddenly changed into an indiscriminate predator, hunting down everything in sight. In their terms, my behaviour was comprehensible in no other way.

If I was still putting out `lost baby' signals in all directions, that only made it more inexplicable, and more sinister. Before, this had been my *raison d'être*, my business, not concerning them but something which they could understand in their own terms. But now it made no sense at all. For there was no baby down there to find.

The net result was that in fact I saw very little. The locals were progressively less and less inclined to come and be seen, which of course only made me the more frantic. And when I did manage to corner something, all I got was baleful eyes, and a small crouched body exuding hatred and malevolence.

I partially realised what was going on at the time, but I was in an emotional situation, and I felt my alienation keenly. To me, too, it was an unexpected and unpleasant reversal of behaviour on their part.

It was the first and only time I have ever felt lonely in the bush.

The ring-tails were the worst sufferers. Ring-tails can, of course, move quite silently when they have a mind to, but when they are travelling normally, without special caution, or when they think they have been spotted by a predator, and speed, not stealth, is at a premium, they take enormous leaps from tree to tree, much further than the brush-tails, crashing into bamboo and cane and suchlike vegetation with a degree of noise out of all proportion to their size. So from my point of view, something that sounded like an elephant in the tree-tops could be one of two things: a partially disabled, clumsy bushy-tail, that is to say, Snoopy, or a ring-tail. There was a ring-tail population explosion at this point in time, and I seemed to be chasing hundreds of ring-tails (actually probably about ten) up and down the creek.

Yet it was a ring-tail that was the exception to the rule. I found one night, sitting on a branch a few feet away from me, wary, but by

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aa. Sir Thomas Wyatt (?1503-1542). Wyatt contends that the cause is contagious inconstancy.

no means unfriendly, neither frozen with fear nor poised for flight. It seemed to recognise me.

I found this somewhat embarrassing. I, most assuredly, did not recognise it. Admittedly it had the advantage of me, since there was only one of me and umpteen of them, but I still felt I ought to be able to reciprocate. I first consciously noticed ring-tails when I was in the company of bushy-tails, and seeing them, as it were, through bushy-tail eyes, some of the bushy-tail prejudices rubbed off on to me. Although I knew, cerebrally, that there was probably more to them than appeared, like my companions I tended to dismiss them as mental featherweights who went, `Twitted-dee-twit! Twitted-dee-twit!' and took off with a great deal of unnecessary commotion at the slightest provocation, reasonable or otherwise. It just shows how much you don't know.

That there was no baby to find emerged only gradually. I became aware that Snug never accompanied Bindi downstream, which seemed to indicate fairly clearly that she must be going upstream from the area where I had located their nest.

I had previously discovered, per medium of the previous false alarms over Snoopy, that there was a female possum living upstream, roughly opposite the entrance to the Boy Scouts' Camp. She seemed to commute across the road to the domain of my old friendly enemy, Champ, the black labrador, where she was duly barked at every night. Champ apparently `owned' her, in the same way that he owned a rabbit which he ritually chased, making sure never to catch it, and a sheep-that-thought-it-was-a-dog. Remembering our old Sparkey, and his protective attitude towards the animals with which had similar arrangements, I had no worries about her safety. As long as Champ barked at her every night, I could be sure that no marauding stray dog would ever have her for tea.

There was still a female possum occupying that same territory at this time. I could smell her, though I never actually saw her. This is not as ridiculous as it sounds. Possums lay a scent trail from a gland in the rear of the body. In females this trail consists of a milky fluid which dries to a whitish colour, clearly visible on a surface such as lino, and very definitely detectable even to a human nose. Particularly in the mating season, the whole possum takes on this smell, and the odour is quite different for males and females. Like all smells, it is impossible to describe in other terms, because our language lacks the vocabulary, but the female smell is a pungent, ovular scent, once smelt, never forgotten, as distinctive in its own way as the scent-marking of a tom-cat, though less acrid.

For several nights running, if I walked up the road and stationed myself beside the group of trees where the lady seemed to live, I would catch a whiff of female possum whenever there was the slightest puff of wind from that direction. But whether it was the same possum that I had seen on previous occasions, or whether Snug had taken over her territory, was something which I could not determine. No doubt another possum would have been able to tell who it was by the smell - Snoopy and Joey had always seemed perplexed when I did not recognise them without visual identification 7- but the acme of my endeavours in that respect was to be able to distinguish between males and females.

While I had seen the possum who lived there previously well enough to know that she was none of my acquaintances, it proved impossible to get a good look at the present incumbent. There was a particularly rumbustious and panic-prone colony of bandicoots living round the base of the group of trees where the possum seemed to be located. Every move I made, audible because of the type of ground-cover, resulted in uproar,

enough to convince any possum who did not know me that it would be prudent to freeze for the next couple of hours. I knew within several trees where the possum had to be living, and, after calling and flashing my torch at the time when possums get up I did manage to stay there quietly, without provoking any further ructions from the bandicoots, for long enough, early in the piece, for Snoopy to have made at least some tentative gesture towards coming to me, if it were she. But with no success.

I tried to get a look at the possum across the road in Champ's preserve. He was only too pleased to have an audience for the nightly ceremony, particularly if his humans were out. I had been rather hesitant about approaching him under such conditions, since in days gone by he had made it clear he regarded me as a potential thief and mass murderer, but now he made it quite evident that I was welcome - presumably as long as I came no more than a few feet into his yard, and refrained from removing or damaging anything. He proudly pointed to the place where his `quarry' was perched. On one occasion the object of his attentions proved to be a ring-tail - perhaps it had got into the act by accident. On another it was no more than a vague movement in a tree-top. Whether it was the same possum as before, following the same nightly routine, or whether, as I said, Snug had taken over her old territory on the opposite side of the road and Champ had recruited a ring-tail so he could continue to follow his custom, I do not know. But it was most unlikely that it was Snoopy: she could have seen the houselights from there, and come home at her leisure.

One of the false alarms at that point came from the house next door downstream. It was a female possum which came to their window, but then went up a tree and refused to come down. It took me several hours to eliminate her as a possibility: she had light-coloured hind feet, something I hadn't consciously seen before, and against the background of the tree trunk it looked from some angles as if one of the digits was truncated. Her face markings were not unlike Charon's, and those I saw further downstream later in Ku-ring-gai Chase, though there the pattern was more extreme. She was presumably one of the next group downstream from us, and had decided to try her luck upstream.

With her encroaching upstream, Bindi holding the central creek and encroaching downstream, and Snug somewhere in the upstream area, possibly as well as the Unknown Lady, there simply wasn't room for Snoopy in the vicinity of the house. At Newport you could have fitted half a dozen more females in, but, with the more extravagant territorial ideas of the Inglesiders, it meant that the only way another female could remain there was if, like Snoopy, she had her core territory in the house itself.

I was, of course, still answering calls from near and far, and asking people whenever I thought there might be a lead somewhere. I was in fact trying everything I could think of, running the whole gamut from pure abstruse logic to pure superstition. If I didn't try diabolism it was probably only because I didn't know any. By this time I was going after any known groups in the environs of our blocks, in the hope that Snoopy might have attached herself to the fringes of one.

One such group I heard about was near, but not in, Katandra Wildlife Sanctuary, on the opposite side of Lane Cove Road, not far from where it rejoins Mona Vale Road in the cutting above Mona Vale Cemetery. Again it was a matter of a favourite illegal rubbish dump, and possums coming to feed off the remains. I was spurred into action with regard to this one by a body on the adjacent part of Mona Vale Road, a mature female, about Snoopy's size and colouration, but with both hind feet intact.

I spent several hours down there at night, but that, too, was a dead place. Just another empty nest. There were no longer any possums

there to be slaughtered on Mona Vale Road, though I suppose, by now, someone will have replenished the supply. The female I found was probably the dominant. She would have been the last to leave.

Despite my best efforts, I couldn't convince myself that the missing body from further up Mona Vale Road was a possum from there, although the geographical distance was about the same as from our group. The nearest houselights, clearly visible, were those of Mona Vale, down on the coast on the opposite side of the cutting, the lights of neighbouring houses being hidden by the terrain. There was nothing to pull them further back up Mona Vale Road, away from the visible houselights.

And so things went on, till about four weeks after Snoopy disappeared. I still kept checking on anything that sounded like a brush-tail nearby, in case Snoopy should return. Poor Charon grew almost inured to my attentions: since Snoopy had gone off with him, I was very interested in knowing where he habitually went.

While I have no doubt whatsoever about how Snoopy would have reacted had she ever come to that place on Mona Vale Road where the body was supposed to be, I began to have doubts about whether she had ever in fact gone that way. In the first place, I learnt that there used to be a resident possum near the house where the possum had appeared on top of the car at midday, although it hadn't been seen lately. And I heard a possum calling, just the usual sort of unspecific call of a mature adult crying its territory, from somewhere in the band of light vegetation along Lane Cove Road. Again I tried to locate it, surveying the area for potential nests in the daytime, going up there at night, but again without success. It could hardly have been Snoopy, not only because it refused to come to me (as indeed she might have done by this time if she had, by some fluke, gone into a delayed and aberrant independence pattern and established herself), but mainly because the possum in question failed to report in to any of the neighbouring houses, as any normal suburbanite would do.

There is very little one can deduce from facts as scanty as these, but a resident possum crying its territory is more likely to be female than male, if only because there seem to be roughly four times the number of females surviving to maturity as there are males. If there was already an established female in that area, then what I heard early in the piece could be explained in two ways. Firstly it was nothing at all to do with Snoopy: the protagonists in the squabble were the resident female, perhaps the daughter or granddaughter of the one seen in days of yore who, like Bindi and especially Snug, had, in the course of a couple of generations, re-adapted to the `wild', becoming increasingly independent of humans and things human, and an unknown male, perhaps the ubiquitous Charon. Alternatively, however, the squabble may have been more serious than it sounded: Snoopy could have followed Charon up there as in the scenario, and a confrontation with another female would adequately explain why she would have failed to return, instead running blindly across Lane Cove Road, and by-passing the houses in her terror.

But another possible explanation for the presence of a live possum in the area where the body was reported to be emerged. Amongst the junk that littered the area just back from the road were a couple of wooden fruit-cases, reinforced with wire so that they could be effectively lidded. The first couple of times I was down there I hadn't taken much conscious notice of them; I had simply searched all the nooks and crannies to make sure that there wasn't an injured animal hiding in any of them. But the more I saw of those boxes, the more reminiscent they seemed to be of my vague impression of the sort of thing used by non-professionals to transport possums for dumping. And I began to recall seeing similar boxes in the

vicinity when I'd stopped to check that a road casualty was none of mine. The possum killed there could well have come from a long, long way away.

The Little Fella

About four weeks after Snoopy disappeared I got a phone call from a house on the same side of Mona Vale Road as Chiltern Road, but further towards Terrey Hills. A possum, obviously ill or injured, had taken refuge in a stable, and accepted food in a way that suggested that it was used to humans.

My heart did cartwheels when I saw him. He was the image of Snoopy as a frightened yearling, his long ears laid back against his head like a terrified hare.

But he manifestly wasn't Snoopy.

The only detectable injuries were grazes on the underside of his paws and body. It looked as if he had been skidded across the road. Whether this, and concussion, were his only problems, or whether he had been ill before he ran, or more probably was chased across the road, was something that could not be ascertained. But he didn't look like a candidate for the vet: there were no diagnostic symptoms discernible to me, and I knew enough by now to be pretty certain that there was nothing even a vet could pick up in a brief examination. And he obviously wasn't in the right state for a protracted stay at the vet's: he was far too aware of his surroundings, and capable of far too much physical activity. Like Erik, Kylie, or even Snoopy, he was going to start attempting to resume his daily routine in a day or two at most, and, if incarcerated in a strange place, would batter either his way out or himself to death in the effort.

Everywhere I went, people had tried to give me possums. I simply couldn't take them. Apart from the illegality of the situation, the last thing I wanted was Another Possum. It would have been the ultimate disloyalty to Snoopy, and, from my point of view, you can't just substitute one individual for another. There are no duplicates. Living creatures are irreplaceable. More importantly, Snoopy had not been missing so long that it was certain that she was dead - other possums have turned up six months after they disappeared - and the presence of Another Possum in Snoopy's house would preclude her from ever returning there.

And the operation was almost certainly doomed to failure from the point of view of the newcomer. Each possum adapts, individually, to the circumstances under which it finds itself during its childhood, the period of imprintation. Once this has passed its habits are fixed for life. The only sort of possum who could have taken over the house would be one of the locals, Kylie or Bindi, who had grown up round the house, seeing Snoopy operating under those conditions, and appreciated her advantages, or one of the Newport houselings who had similarly coveted Snoopy's prize nest there. To any other possum the situation would have been not only unprecedented but unthinkable.

As I explained before, there was simply no room for another adult female in my vicinity, unless, like Snoopy, she had her core territory in the house. Bindi would have massacred any strange, frightened, and probably convalescent female, not because Bindi was a particularly ferocious or even officious possum, but just because those are the rules. A mature male would have been in only slightly less parlous condition. Charon would have eaten him.

The people who tried to give me possums did so from the very best motives. They wanted to help console me, they found it necessary to get rid of a possum who was being a nuisance but they wanted to do the best thing possible for it by giving it to someone with some experience of such creatures, who also lived in an area suitable for possums. But I had to say no, every time. Almost all the people I refused understood.

But this little fella looked like the exception to the rule. It is impossible to reconstruct individual cases, or predict individual behaviour, from the general rule, but if there is no other information, then one had to suppose that the individual in question conforms to the norm, and act upon that assumption because it is more often true than otherwise, until a more secure basis emerges. In those terms there was little doubt about what had happened, and about what would happen.

This young gentleman was a juvenile male in his first season, of an age at which young males must almost inevitably leave home. The chances were about 99 to 1 that he was in the process of leaving, whether he knew it or not.

Home, almost certainly, was on the opposite side of Mona Vale Road. The configuration of cleared and wooded land meant that there could be no groups in the immediate vicinity on our side of the road - quite possibly ours would have been the nearest, and if he had been uninjured he would have gone there of his own accord - while there was obvious possum country on the other side of the highway. I in fact confirmed his origin, insofar as it is possible to confirm such a thing - extreme likelihood but not absolute proof - a few days later. There was one, and only one, large group located across the road, with identical face-markings and a strikingly similar build, not to mention peculiar local behaviour I'll deal with later. But it was pretty clear even without this.

He had two possible future options: he could stay where he was, and make the best recovery he could in the place which he himself had chosen, or he could continue his journey with me and suffer the trauma of being a sick, helpless possum in a totally strange and frightening place.

Normally there would have been no choice to make. Previously and since I have talked my head off trying to persuade people to let sick possums stay where they are, after first taking them to the vet if this is not likely to do more harm than good. Here I wouldn't even have to do any talking, since his new-found friend was one of the nicest people I encountered, and would have been only too happy to subsidize his convalescence. The fact that he had not only chosen to nest in the stable - and, as I knew from Erik, the nest the possum chooses is always much better than the one you chose for him, regardless of practicalities - but had accepted food from his human host, only reinforced the case.

On the other hand there was what I had learnt of the behaviour of sick possums, from Erik, Snoopy and Kylie - and later learnt again at Newport from Sherry, Honey, `Miri' and Midge. The first thing a convalescent possum wants to do is to get up and go, resume its normal routine and secure its territory. It will insist upon doing so as soon as it can crawl, or even drag itself, more than a few feet. It is almost impossible to stop it, and if you do succeed in shutting it in, it will grow so frantic that it will undo any good so far achieved. Once free, the adrenalin reaction will carry it far enough to get itself into difficulties, but, unless there is some refuge like a disused burrow within a foot or so of the place where it collapses, not far enough to get itself out of difficulties. Even the dubious security of the nearest tree, however unsuitable, is denied it, since when a possum becomes ill, or its general condition is affected through injury, the first thing to go is the back legs, which provide the main locomotive power for climbing. Certainly, this last was true of the young chap in question.

Furthermore, there was little doubt about <u>where</u> he would go when he went. While he might already be in the migration behaviour pattern, his journey had been curtailed hardly a hundred yards from where it started. On the side of the road where he was there was only a narrow, intermittent band

of vegetation along the roadside, fraught with conspicuously repellent open spaces. A fit male, or for that matter female, could certainly have traversed the area, in one fell swoop. But routes and places suitable for residence are two entirely different things. The nearest possible place for a possum to live on that side of Mona Vale Road was the block on the corner of Chiltern, opposite the house where Snoopy turned up the first time. I knew the people who lived three. They had previously had possums, but at this stage they hadn't seen any for months. At the risk of being a bore, I cannot believe that this was unrelated to the dramatic and accelerating increase in the volume of traffic on Mona Vale Road during the last couple of months we lived there. With the possible exception of Erik, the possums didn't migrate in our direction.

Now that his momentum had been checked, there was absolutely no incentive for a young male in the vicinity on that side of the road, the side he was on now. Whether because he was trying to go home, or because he was looking for his normal food, or just because he was of an age when a male is compelled to follow his nose to the nearest females, which happened to be where he came from, the chances were that he would try to re-cross that road, in a much worse condition than that in which he made his first attempt.

If, by some miracle, he survived the second crossing, or if I managed to locate his group in time and we arranged to see him safely home, his problems would be only just beginning. He would not only be an unwanted juvenile male, who had already been expelled, but a helpless, invalid possum, bound to attract the hostile attentions of his fellows, if only because he was unable to get out of their way. And this in the mating season, in the midst of all that frantic activity and frayed tempers. It is very possible that he would have been driven straight back on to that mindless, terrible road.

To leave him where he was would have been something close to murder through inaction.

There were certainly drawbacks to the alternative, taking him home with me, further in the direction he seemed to be heading, and trying to relocate him. His physical recovery would be impeded by the trauma of the experience. There would be very little I could do for him, from the medical point of view, simply because he wasn't going to co-operate. Anything I did would have to be a matter of force, rather than persuasion, and in consequence he would be provoked into leaving even earlier.

With Erik, there had been a previous fund of trust, affection and tolerance on which to draw. And there was some degree of communication between us: because of the superficial anatomical similarities, possums and humans put out some similar signals. Sometimes the similarity is illusory, because the signals have a different meaning to each party, but many are roughly equivalent, and after all it is doubtful whether `love', `hate', `approval', `disgust' and so forth are completely identical in any two humans. There are many `functional analogues', and the human side of the interaction, at least, can try to copy peculiarly possum gestures once their meaning is understood. Through years of acquaintance, I could read Erik, and he could read me: he'd come to understand my `accent'.

To this little chap, however, I was going to be a total and incomprehensible stranger who removed possums from their chosen nests. His own new human would have been able to do more in that line than I.

But leave he would, whether it was a matter of two days or four, before he was halfway fit to do so. And the additional treatment could hardly be considered a boon if he ran straight under a car in consequence. While the operation may be successful, it is a little pointless if the

patient dies. There is in any case a limit to what anyone, anywhere, can do for a sick possum, and that limit is very little more than to give it the best possible chance to recover of its own accord. And any assessment of this must take into account the conditions under which it will spend its convalescence, once it is no longer under your direct supervision.

There is only one sort of possum which moves voluntarily and readily settles down in its new surroundings, a young male already in the migration pattern, and this, apparently was such a one. There was a reasonable chance that he might want to stay: with Charon patrolling an enormous territory which meant he was absent from any particular place more frequently than he was present, there was a good chance that this little fella would be able to stay, if he had the common sense and discretion to stay out of the way of the senior male. It is always easier for males to double up on a dominant-subordinate basis than it is for females, because of the nature of male territoriality.

If he did leave, then at least, given his physical condition, it would take him longer to get back to the highway. To be sure he would run risks en route, stray marauding dogs, the occasional fox, or even a trespassing rogue human, but these same dangers existed where he was, with Mona Vale Road to boot. The longer he took to get back to Mona Vale Road the better the chances that he would find some place that caught his fancy, and settle down for a while, long enough to recover properly, before resuming his travels.

Thus the theory.

In fact I think the matter was decided from the moment I saw him. He was so like a younger Snoopy that I doubt whether I could have left him in distress, knowing the probable outcome, without trying to do something for him. However, the rationalization itself had some validity, and I'd reached the point where I'd resolved to act if the reasons were sound, even if I knew my motives were suspect.

But even on an emotional level it was still a very difficult decision. I thought that by now I knew something about suburbanite possums, and all my experience clamoured that he should not be left where he was. But after my persistent failure to find any trace of Snoopy, and the multiplicity of hypothetical reconstructions I had concocted, all but one of which manifestly had to be pure fiction, my confidence in both my ability and my knowledge was severely shaken. I was greatly relieved when events seemed to show that I was at least partially justified.

As usual, it was more by good luck than by good management. For my predictions were based on my knowledge of suburbanite possums, and it eventuated that this little fella was not a true suburbanite.

So the unfortunate young man was dumped in a sugar bag and took what was undoubtedly his first motorbike ride, to emerge and find himself translated to a totally different world.

He reacted accordingly.

I unpacked him in the laundry, intending to give him a more thorough physical examination, and a dose of antibiotic on principle. After my experience with Erik, I'd decided that a single dose was hardly likely to prove fatal, and, if more than I knew was wrong with him, speed might prove his salvation.

Never have I met a more obstreperous customer. He scrabbled and struggled and threatened and bit, and categorically refused to take his medicine. I remembered Kylie, and roared at him in his own language.

He dissolved into a quivering mass of jelly. He lay stretched out, flat on his back, without the slightest movement in protest, and took his medicine like a lamb. I could have done anything with him.

My God, a possum that size! He must be very, very careful not to provoke it.

Poor little guy. I tried to avoid using such drastic methods again.

Particularly after that he showed little sign of relaxing in the laundry. Since rest and recuperation was the order of the day, I decided to try him in the `cupboard' at the end of the `hall' running parallel to the cats' room in the annex, where Erik had put himself when he first departed from the box I'd provided *chez* cats. This `cupboard' had since undergone a number of deplorably makeshift modifications to adapt it, transient sick possums for the use of, including a lean-to door by which it could be shut off from the rest of the annex. I was kicking myself for not thinking of putting him there in the first place. So I installed him and tactfully withdrew. The last thing he needed was strange company, mine above all.

The next thing I knew he was up on the roof, in the middle of the day.

The `cupboard' was of course not possum proof: it was easy enough for a possum to squeeze under the corrugated iron roofing, and the chicken wire I'd installed as an anti-Kylie device had never been more than an irritating few seconds' delay. However, I certainly had not expected my new acquaintance, restricted as he was in his movements, to manage to haul himself up and depart, especially in broad daylight.

Obviously, the first thing he wanted to do when he found himself in a strange place was to get up somewhere high and orientate himself. So he'd clawed his way up there to find out where he was, particularly in relationship to home. And clearly wished he hadn't.

Possums are rather like humans. It is very difficult for them to get disorientated in the large sense, when it is a matter, say, of finding their way back from the heights of Ingleside to the coast. But it is quite easy for them to get lost in the narrow sense, to be unable to find the way from this valley to the next, or even to work out which way to go, if the goal is hidden in a depression a few hundred yards away, but in an unknown direction. The place he had come from was out of sight, out of earshot, and almost certainly out of scent. He might as well have been on another planet. As became apparent later, even the type of country was completely new to him.

I recaptured him, and incarcerated him more securely.

He cheered up a little that night. Bindi, who by this time had provisionally forgiven me, turned up for her handout. He heard her going across the roof, the purposeful but leisurely gait of a contented possum following its normal routine. He pricked up his ears and brightened visibly. A possum! Apparently not every possum that came to this appalling place was eaten, nightmarish monsters despite. And such an interesting possum, too, as his nose informed him.

The next morning his condition had not improved as much as I'd hoped it would, if all that was wrong with him was mild concussion and shock. Whether it was then or later that I took him to the vet I'm not sure. I have a dim recollection of saying, `Now watch out for this one. He isn't Snoopy, he's a real wild possum.' Only to see him make a liar of me by behaving with exemplary docility, as animals tend to do at the vet's, if only because they are petrified by finding themselves in circumstances so entirely beyond their comprehension and control. He was certainly wild enough a short time before, in fact he was fairly ropeable.

The result was inconclusive. There was nothing beyond grazes and general indisposition that could be detected without running the risk of anaesthetizing him, a very perilous procedure. The antibiotic wouldn't

hurt, but wouldn't do any good unless what was wrong with him was something for which it was a specific. The only practical course was just to give him the opportunity to recover of his own, go on doing what I was doing.

However, it was either that night or the next that he Absolutely Had to Leave. While his physical progress was certainly not all that might be desired, he reached the point, mentally, where he was fretting so much that this in itself was adversely affecting his condition.

I applied all the lessons I'd learnt from Erik, but with very mixed success. Even roaring at him in his own language now failed to subdue him. Nothing ever works twice. His initial misgivings had been partially allayed by the fact that, contrary to expectations, he had not found himself on the menu; instead he had been provided with a rather extensive menu of his own. He was prepared to call my bluff, and once he had done so successfully, the game was up. He knew that however loudly I might bark, I wasn't going to bite effectively. Sheer size is unimportant, unless it is translated into force. He now knew that there was no barrier to his behaving as obstreperously as possible, and did so.

Knowing from Erik that I would have to capitulate in the end, I decided to minimise the deterioration caused by fretting, and put him back in the `cupboard' adjoining the cats' room. He was out on the roof before it was properly dark. I hung around outside, both to see how he fared and to try to give him at least the illusion that I was letting him go, rather than that he was escaping. I could hardly hope that, given the freedom to come and go, he, like Erik, would choose to come. But if it were not a matter of fleeing headlong from durance vile, at least he might stay in the vicinity, where I could rescue him if he got into audible trouble.

He would not, however, tolerate even a respectful escort three paces behind. Even that was construed as a chase. To stay with him I would have had to chase him indeed, so I dropped back and followed his progress by ear. This was easy enough, since his movements were clumsy, and the terrain unfamiliar.

He went crashing through the bushes to the creek, then I heard the splashing as he tried to walk across it. Fortunately he hit the shallows and reached the other side without mishap. The next thing I heard was from downstream, as he headed down towards the place where Bindi was usually to be found at this time of night.

I heard him propositioning, plaintively. She repelled him, as etiquette demands, but not too unkindly. No, she was unavailable - by this time she was probably pregnant with Meggs - but there were no hard feelings. She quite understood that this personable young man felt bound to ask the question. However, he persisted, despite repeated rebuffs. Perhaps he couldn't believe that so mild a rejection was seriously intended. Perhaps `no' really meant `yes'? Eventually she was forced to send him firmly about his business, but still without any undue rancour.

He seemed to be heading back up the creek, but then I lost track of him. I waited for a while, but there was only silence.

`Beauty,' I thought, `Love conquers all.' And went back to the house.

He wasn't likely to go too far while he was so besotted with Bindi.

There was no sign or sound of him for the next few days, and I concluded that he had, after all, gone off, or met with some misfortune. But a week after he left there was a bad fight, with someone screaming, in some small trees very close to the house. I shot out the door on a reflex action.

To say that my heart stopped when I saw the tableau in front of me would be a cliché, but it was literally true. Suddenly I was back three years, with Erik up the big gum, and Snoopy lying helpless on the ground. But the possum up the tree was the ubiquitous Charon, and the possum supine and rigid on the ground, its long ears laid back like a frightened hare, was the little fella, Rastus.

Apparently Charon had returned from the far-flung reaches of his territory and caught the interloper off guard. I collected the little fella and took him back into the house for the night.

He was badly shaken and, physically, in not much better shape than when I first acquired him. However, by the following evening, he was once more in the state where he Absolutely Had to Leave. So I turned him loose.

That was the last I saw of him. There were no more disturbances in the vicinity, so either he'd learnt his lesson, and behaved more circumspectly, or Charon had once again departed after his exercise in blitzkrieg. From the point of view of relocation, the operation was a success: the fact that Rastus was still around a week later seemed to indicate that he'd settled in, and one beating was unlikely to change his mind; I was cursing that he hadn't shown up before, so the whole horrible mess might have been avoided. But whether the patient died or not is something I just don't know.

Certainly, on this occasion, hubris was not followed by a condign catastrophe: I did not find his body on the road. And I would be the last to know if the story had a happy ending.

From his point of view, he had been badly hurt, then kidnapped by a terrible ogre, undoubtedly the gargantuan possum that all little possums have nightmares about, who subjected him to all sorts of unspeakable indignities and refinements of torture. Fortunately, he'd contrived to escape, and managed, entirely through his own cleverness, to find himself a perfectly splendid situation, where unimaginable delicacies literally grew on trees, and a gentle, beautiful damsel dwelt among the delectable bounty - an enchanted princess, no less, for our dashing young hero to woo.

There were even, as his nose would have told him, horses and stables in the vicinity, down the creek, on both sides of Cicada Glen Road, and closer, but in less suitable country, immediately opposite across Chiltern Road.

It would have been the adventure of his life, and I hope it turned out well. But I was the last person he would voluntarily approach. I was the wicked witch.

One thing, however, was clear. There was no room for any more adult possums at all in the immediate vicinity. If Rastus managed to stay, then he occupied the last available niche. If he couldn't stay, then no one could.

House possums, horse possums, and creek possums

There were several very puzzling things about the little fella, starting from the precise spot where he was found. He had certainly been on the road, and bore the marks to prove it, but he had by-passed the obvious refuge for an injured animal, a band of low, dense vegetation, lantana I think, along the roadside, where there were even empty boxes or cartons to hide in strewn about, instead determinedly continuing until he found a stable.

When I got him home, his diet proved highly unorthodox. He didn't drink. At all. Not water, not milk, not tea, not even lime cordial. Possums don't drink that much, getting the bulk of their water requirements from vegetation. Beverages are mainly for pleasure - those in the house,

Joey, Snoopy, Kylie, probably drank more than most, because they had more opportunity to do so. But I had never met a possum who didn't drink at all. When it was necessary to lure Erik, the surest bait was a steaming cup of sweetened milk or white tea, its irresistible aroma drifting up to the twitching nose, which came to the smell as if on a string, the possum, being attached to the nose, perforce following. The same was true of the Newport people.

And, what from my point of view was even more iconoclastic, he wouldn't eat bread. He didn't even seem to know what it was. From an objective point of view, I suppose a slice of packaged bread might be considered a rather unlikely foodstuff: if one came from Mars, one might try using it to wipe one's nose, or patch a garment, or prop up a piece of furniture, before one thought of trying to eat it. But I'd never met a possum, even the tiniest baby, whose nose didn't give it the requisite instructions when first confronted with it.

On the other hand, he considered the ordinary staple creek vegetation an undreamt of delicacy. I mean I know that black wattle is nice, particularly the new pink tips, but it hardly justifies ecstasies and Absolutely Delicious reactions.

And to cap it all off, the first thing he did when he was released was to try to walk across the creek.

However, I consigned all this to the realm of life's great imponderables. I had a more immediate concern.

The hypothetical group from which Rastus had come seemed as if it was possibly connected with the most promising sighting in the trans-Mona Vale Road area (with, of course, concomitant missing and unidentified body). It seemed most unlikely that Snoopy would still be in that vicinity, alive - it is axiomatic that she would continue to go to houses and draw attention to her presence as the possum sighted had done. But with nothing else to go on I wanted to check out that hypothetical group, in case she was still hanging around the fringes.

If all this sounds abstruse, not to say mystical or metaphysical, I can only say that it wasn't. If you have had reason to notice possum behaviour and whereabouts over a period of years, then you can pick possum country from a distance, just as a cattleman can pick cattle country, or a sheepman sheep country. Routes can also be conjectured, though with less certainty, because the vagaries of individual behaviour can't be predicted with as much probability, but you can make some assessment of likelihood.

The human settlement pattern in that vicinity is similar on both sides of Mona Vale Road, a necklace of houses surrounding open space. But on the side where Rastus had shown up the open space was cleared and put to agricultural use, while on the other side of the road it was still covered with vegetation.

The house where the possum had come to the window lay on the opposite side of the next road down the slope, parallel to Mona Vale Road. This second road was very narrow and unobtrusive - I'm not sure that it was even surfaced - in any case, a possum non-event. The land that lay directly opposite the house, in the Mona Vale Road block, was uncleared, and there were no houses, so that, to all possum intents and purposes, the row of houses where the incident occurred formed the farther boundary of the area of scrub which should be the habitat of the supposed group.

So I started from the secondary road, walking up the slope towards Mona Vale Road, a little way into the scrub. I waited for about an hour before I heard a possum call, from further up towards the highway. I followed the sound as far as I could be sure of the direction, then waited

again. Again a possum called from further up the slope, so I followed my ears, and stepped through some bushes to emerge in the back yard of one of the houses abutting Mona Vale Road, where a lady was burning some rubbish, to my considerable mortification, and the astonishment of both.

Fortunately for my sake she was a very kind lady, and quite sympathetic. There were possums there; the people didn't know much about them; they hung around the stables and pinched some of the horses' food.

They were there all right. The presence of a stranger made them freeze for a while, but then they started to move again. They weren't shy of humans, they just had very little to do with them.

I located what seemed to be the dominant, who was not excessively self-assertive. This meant that there would be a chance a newcomer might be able to hover around the fringes.

I therefore turned my attention to the others, who, thoroughly disconcerted by my persistent `hunting' of the dominant, turned their backs to me, and departed *pari passu* as I approached. I got a reasonable glimpse of at least one other, but in the end I had to settle for just making my presence known and waiting. If Snoopy were indeed clinging precariously to the fringes of such a group, deprived of the amenities provided by friendly humans, she would certainly want out. I gave her more than adequate opportunity, with no success.

While I was waiting I had a look around. I was struck first by the relationship between the horses and possums, the casual acceptance on both sides, the confident way each species ignored the other, and went about its own special business. Secondly, the type of country, though not exactly new to me, was vaguely perplexing. There was no creek, nothing resembling a body of water; the vegetation was the sparse variety typical of the slopes and plateaux well away from the creek.

After I got home, a handful of small change fell tinkling to the floor of my skull, and suddenly I was scurrying frantically around trying to immobilise the bouncing coins before they could roll away.

There was virtually no doubt that it was Rastus' home group. The location was as predicted, and those I did see had the same facial markings, that is to say, similar to Snoopy's markings, and the same general appearance.

It seemed, therefore, that there were horse possums as well as house possums, and Rastus was a horse possum. When he found himself injured, on the wrong side of the road, he had by-passed the first available refuge to follow his nose to a stable, which, with its familiar smells and conditions, was as much his natural habitat as a house is to possums like Jenny and Snoopy. He didn't know what bread was because he had no use for it: he got his carbohydrate supplement, his handout, from his equine associates.

Later I was to meet a refinement of the horse possum syndrome: what appeared to be one particular possum regularly going to the stall of a particular horse, and being permitted to take some of its food. The horse in question was not known for its even temper or amiability: in fact it proved the bane of my vigil. That all sounds extraordinarily like the non-possum bond I've known between possums and humans, and heard of between possums and other species.

Of more immediate relevance, there were creek possums and non-creek possums. All the possums I'd met so far were creek possums, and I'd never even considered the possibility that they came in any other kind. But Rastus was a non-creek possum: he didn't know what potable liquids that didn't come from Mumma's pouch were for; he tried to walk across the creek because he'd never encountered a large surface of liquid - the ground was

the ground, and, allowing for the vagaries of pliable undergrowth, it was meant to be *terra firma*; he regarded the mundane staple creek vegetation as the epitome of exotic delicacies, because to him that's exactly what it was.[1]

Now if the possum world is divided into creek and non-creek possum, that is to say drinking and non-drinking possums, then Snoopy was a creek possum *par excellence*. This meant that, whatever happened to her, once the first panic was over she would have to go back to a creek. In country such as this where the dramatic contrast between creek and slope vegetation makes distant watercourses obvious even to humans, Snoopy, with the additional advantage of a keen sense of smell, would have no difficulty locating a creek, once she applied herself to the problem. Yet I knew by now that it was virtually certain that she was nowhere, alive, along the upper reaches of our creek. Which left me more or less where I had started from. Snoopy went down the creek. It started to look as if she continued to do so.

Down the creek

While I had searched down the creek, with inconclusive results, during the first few days, I had concentrated on the upstream area because, to my mind, the highway represented the worst danger. If Snoopy were down the creek, then, aside from unavoidable and ubiquitous risks like stray dogs, she was in no immediate danger. I more or less expected her to come back of her own accord, as she had done, regularly, for over a year. I had not taken into account the possibility of a flash flood, and Snoopy coming back along the bank to her usual crossing, hesitating on the brink, bewildered by the sudden raging torrent, uncertain whether to try to cross or go further upstream to the bridge she used to use, and having the bank washed out from under her at that precise moment. If the possibility had occurred to me I doubt whether I would have taken it seriously. Once that part of the bank had been carried away, and the event had happened or not happened, there was again no point in taking such possibilities into consideration. Ironically, after the devastating inundation of the first week and a half, there had been no further rain, and we were experiencing something very close to a drought.

If Snoopy were in fact anywhere close at hand downstream, despite the surplus of female possums in the area, then she was staying there of her own free will, as she was if she were upstream. I had no real business trying to make her come back. No drastic changes or dire threats seemed likely in the immediate future. And while I would have given everything I owned to be sure of such an outcome, it was even more important, and certainly more urgent, to take account of less pleasant

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[1]Stop press 19th November, 2011:- The current female possum living over the corner of my study, from where I can hear a lot of what is going on, is Squirt, who has an intermittent predilection for black sweet tea with lemon, i.e. the last of my own cup poured into a small wide-mouthed dish. Her current offspring is Tyke (probably female, but very fluffy, so gender not quite certain.) In the last few days Tyke showed a great desire to share her mother's tea – the smell seemed to be irresistible. However, when offered the dish, she couldn't work out what to do with it – the tea went everywhere, up her nose, on the floor, anywhere but her mouth because she had no idea that it should be lapped, or how to go about lapping. But she very much wanted that stuff that smelt so good and that mum enjoyed so much. So, at the age of about 2 ½ months out of the pouch outside the nest, and at a stage where she was starting to swear at her mother in the nest, but still wanted to jump on mum's back outside (a fairly common prelude stage to declaring independence),over a period of about 3 days' trial and error, with much coughing and spluttering, Tyke finally taught herself to lap – a not inappropriate accomplishment in a very wet area where there are creeks and pools all over the place. Apparently drinking free liquid by lapping is not innate, at least in some possums. It has to be learned.

possibilities. If Snoopy were dead, she was dead, and there was nothing I could do about it. But the possibility that she was still wandering, being driven from group to group, was one that was simply intolerable. And I knew from Erik, who must have been ill for weeks, if not months, before he returned, to get into the condition he was in, that unless there is some injury which is immediately fatal, a possum can go on suffering almost indefinitely.

Now, however, everything seemed to point to the possibility that, dead or alive, she was down the creek. It probably should have done so from the beginning if I had not been so obsessed by the horrors of Mona Vale Road, and the fact that Snoopy had gone that way the previous time. So, once more, down the creek I went.

I revisited the glade where the downstream group was centred, without being able to identify any of the residents: when I was there during the mating convention, they had enough on their minds not to be concerned about someone on the ground, twenty to forty feet below, but now they were rather more diffident. However, I did discover a house I didn't know existed.

By the time you get to the end of the block, the creek depression, already deep enough to hide our house from view from the Lane Cove Road side of the block upstream, has become a definite valley, with sub-folds and depressions in which some of the houses nestle. If I saw the track leading to this particular house from the road, I must have assumed it belonged to one of the others I did find. I had in fact heard the dogs who lived there, and were chained or confined to the house at night, barking almost every evening, but again assumed, somehow, that they belonged to one of the neighbouring houses. If I'd visited that house the first time Snoopy disappeared, then I'd forgotten it completely in the interim.

Perhaps even more important was the shed which went with it, on the fringe of the area occupied by the group. It was used to store old furniture and equipment. The house upstream had been furnished from my parents' cast-offs, and it just so happened that the furniture stored in the shed belonged to the same era. Some of the key pieces were identical. The whole atmosphere of the place would have shouted `home' to Snoopy.

I have no doubt that Snoopy, if she ever slept down there during the day, would have gone to that shed. While she had never got into the roof upstream, because that would have required a deal of gymnastic agility, there were other roofs, access to which, from a possum viewpoint, involved squeezing through narrow spaces rather than aerobatics, and those she could have managed quite easily. This was one of them, and I think that she could even have managed to get inside the shed proper by squeezing through a gap in the wall, if she'd had a mind to.

Unfortunately, this did not preclude the Lane Cove Road-Mona Vale Road scenario: the shed was located near the beginning of one of the routes across the block.

The owner was extremely sympathetic and tolerant of my particular brand of insanity, like everyone else in the neighbourhood. I readily got permission to root through the contents of the shed, which I did very thoroughly, with no success. However, I did hear possum-like rustlings in the roof. There were certainly bush-rats around; whether there was a possum as well was something I could not be sure of.

I arranged to come back that evening and wait for whatever came out. Unfortunately, there were several possible exits from the roof, on different sides of the shed, mutually invisible. If there was a possum there, it departed under cover of the noise made by its vociferous canine neighbours.

Knowing that the owner of the property would be out that night, and the dogs chained and probably bored and anxious for distraction, any excuse to bark, I'd armed myself with some cold meat and bones, on the theory that even they couldn't talk with their mouths full. Any resident possum would be used to the dogs' habitual barking, knowing that they were confined to a certain area and couldn't catch it outside that area. But a dog barking at something specific has a different note, which even I can detect. If those dogs decided to proclaim to the world that there was a dangerous intruder on the premises, that would be enough to frighten off anything.

Unfortunately the plan was only partially effective. At first they barked at my every move, notwithstanding my blandishments. Then they permitted themselves to be bribed, when I showed no signs of damaging or stealing anything, and tolerated my activities, but nevertheless continued to eat and bark in relays. A resident possum, who was not Snoopy, might not be put off by this later non-directional barking, but had ample opportunity to slip away into the bush without my hearing it, just as the possum who appeared on the car had vanished under cover of the rain.

I suspect that's what happened. My feeling was that there was a possum there, and such feelings are often based on subliminal observation. I might even be able to put a name to both those fugacious possums, the same in each case. A resident possum would certainly account for the punctuality with which the dogs started barking each evening at sunset. But, although there were anonymous possums in the vicinity later on and on other evenings, and I heard noises in the roof which might or might not have been a possum, I consciously heard no diagnostic noises from there, such as a possum sneeze, which sounds so tactlessly like breaking wind.

At any rate, there was no joy there now. So I started to explore the possibility that what goes down the creek goes down the creek, beyond the block if necessary.

Cicada Creek is channelled under Cicada Glen Road, and continues through the valley until it runs into Pittwater in the south-west corner of McCarr's Creek Inlet. Across Cicada Glen Road the valley through which it runs broadens, leaving a fair sized plain between the eastern and western ridges, until spurs from the ridges come together again, leaving only the narrow gorge through which the creek flows. Part of the area belongs to Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, but its boundary is irregular. Further up Chiltern Road, on the western side, the Chase starts immediately beyond the properties lining the road, meeting the road itself near the junction with Cicada Glen. But Chiltern Road continues a little further beyond the junction, running along the western ridge, and the private land continues along the eastern side of the road, the properties on the eastern flank of the ridge forming a finger projecting into the outline of the Chase. For along Cicada Glen Road the pattern is the same as along Chiltern, a single row of properties fronting on to the road, with the Chase immediately behind them.

Immediately opposite the area occupied by the downstream group, on the other side of the road and contiguous with the left, or western, bank of the creek, was a property with no human habitation, used for horses. There were a few small trees near the road beside the creek, and others scattered along the bank. I had already trespassed briefly in the first few days, because, apart from sheds and shelters for horses and their belongings, there were the burnt out remains of what might once have been a house which, from a distance, looked as if it might harbour travelling possums. It proved to be singularly devoid of nooks and crannies of the sort favoured by them, although what remained of the roof was an unknown

quantity. The property, therefore, had some obvious attractions which might induce a possum to cross the road, and the road itself was no real barrier at this point. Though partially lit, it was narrow, and comparatively quiet, and the vegetation on either side meant that all that was required was a short, sharp sprint.

My initial reaction to the possibility that Snoopy might have crossed the road was to go round all the houses along that part of Cicada Glen Road - previously I'd given priority to other parts of the block, and I wasn't sure by this time which houses I'd visited. In the course of this I met the owner of the property next to the creek, where the horses were stabled. He told me that he'd seen possums around, stealing food out of the horses' troughs. With infinite kindness he gave me permission to keep the horses, goats, calves and whatever company for a few nights, and cut through the property to the Chase if necessary.

I collected supplies from the house and walked down just before sunset. I took the road rather than walking down the creek itself - the creek route was easy enough for a possum-sized animal, but `wallaby tracks' a foot high are hardly conducive to human traffic, especially when the human in question has inhibitions about bulldozing its way through the undergrowth that gives the regulars such useful protection.

After trying to persuade the horses that I was harmless I stationed myself where I could see both the food trough and the trees along the road.

The first dinner guests were the bush rats. Where there is food or shelter for possums to appropriate, the rats will be there too.

Where there are rats, the cats will follow. The next arrival was a long, rangy, black-and-white tom, with eyes that shone sapphire blue in the torchlight, instead of the traditional green. He was wearing a collar with my phone number on it, and he looked remarkably like the cat I had left curled up asleep on a banana chair, apparently settled for the night, some twenty minutes before.

He was as surprised to see me as I was to see him. Apparently he hadn't trailed me down the road, but had come straight down the creek. Given that he seemed to have no intention of moving when I left him, it must have been a ten-minute trot.

At least it substantiated the principle that what goes down the creek goes down the creek.

And of course Snoopy, a grounded possum approximately the same size and making similar movements, would have used much the same routes.

Smiley was quite obviously pleased to see me - like Snoopy he was always delighted if I showed signs of sharing his activities, as long as I didn't do so often enough for it to be tantamount to pestering. He stayed with me for better than an hour before sauntering off in the direction of the houses on the extension of Chiltern Road, on tomcat business of his own. I appreciated his company, but by the same token I had certain qualms about encouraging him in case his presence should deter the possums.

Just before he left, a possum finally did appear, in the trees beside the road. Anxious it shouldn't get away before I identified it, I went over to the trees, far too precipitately. After all those years of dealing with possums, I should have known better. The possum, thoroughly disconcerted, stayed up the top of the tree.

That meant that I had to hunt it. It tried to get away by the tree routes, but I followed its every move, and the routes so happened to run so that they brought it down a little, where I could get a better view. It was a male. There was one male possum I'd seen rather too much of recently, and I was about 80% certain that this, once again, was Charon.

On previous occasions I'd tried to entice him with bread. Now, after the lesson of Rastus, I tried to lure him closer by putting pieces of fruit on low branches, then retreating to a respectful distance. This he could not resist, but each time I advanced towards him, he fled back up the tree. What I did manage to see only went to confirm that he was Charon.

So Charon finally seemed to have been explained, more than a month too late. He was basically a creek possum, like the rest of them, but he was a horse possum, not a house possum, and man-shy. For all I know he might have been a genuine `wild' possum, coming originally from the Chase and working his way upstream, finding out about horses on en route: the face markings I saw later downstream in the Chase were entirely strange to me, but might, on reflection, have been a more exaggerated version of Charon's.

He covered an enormous territory, even discounting the suppositious sighting on the abandoned car near Lane Cove Road, and Snoopy could have followed him almost anywhere. But the mating convention had been downstream, and Charon himself, in his normal, non-mating season routine, followed the creek even further down, across the road, to the stables. Even mating possums have to eat, and there seemed a very real chance that Snoopy would have followed him to his favourite restaurant.

But she wasn't there now. She had not, apparently, come back up the creek, nor had she turned up at any of the surrounding houses. The only option that seemed to leave for Snoopy, alive, was still further down the creek.

Further down the creek meant Ku-ring-gai Chase. The conformation of the valley through which Cicada Creek flows is not really clear on the military map of the area. It is basically tripartite, spurs from the two ridges coming together to cut off the plain, leaving only a narrow channel where the creek drops over a small waterfall, then opening out into a wider, but steeper and ever deepening gorge, as the creek cuts its way down towards the sea, running over a second, larger waterfall on the way. This gorge is quite precipitous, a maze of vertical folds and smaller depressions where stormwater feeder creeks run down the side of the ridges to join the main creek. It is divided even more sharply horizontally, into levels, or natural terraces, with an abrupt drop of twenty feet or so between each, and, once below the upper slopes of the ridges, the area is cut off visually from the surrounding countryside. After a quarter of a mile or so there is once again a break: the ridges approach each other again, not so closely as at the head of the middle valley, then it broadens out into a wide valley, with the folds of the western ridge forming valleys equal in area to the middle Cicada Creek valley, as it joins McCarr's Creek Inlet.

It is very beautiful country, a hidden valley still virtually untouched, within a couple of miles of densely populated suburbia. It is a favourite afternoon walk for weekend hikers - I was down there on a Sunday and found it too much like George Street for my taste. It is also a natural chimney.

Since I was old enough to comprehend the implications for native animals I have always loathed bushfires. For a possum, survival would be a matter of sheer luck, against astronomical odds. Something like that is entirely beyond a possum's comprehension. Fires tend to break out during the day, when the possums are asleep in their nests. Under those circumstances, nothing would induce them to even attempt to leave, they would simply cling to the safest place they knew and burn with it.

Bushfires are a part of life in places like Ingleside. I'd always hated them, but I could gain some comfort from the fact that at least one possum, Snoopy, was comparatively safe. Now that wasn't true any more.

Ironically, as I said, since the rains which washed away the creek bank, the weather had been dry, and unseasonably warm in the daytime. The previous wet summer had encouraged luxuriant vegetation, which now withered on the ground, in the trees, everywhere. The whole place was tinder dry, needing only a spark to create a holocaust.

I had in fact been told what had happened in that valley on previous occasions by members of the volunteer bushfire brigade, but it's one of those situations where you don't need to be told, you only have to look. Any fire that started in that valley would race uphill, out of control, unless some fluky weather conditions, adverse winds or a tropical downpour, intervened.

It seemed almost inevitable that the spark would be supplied, even without human intervention. Ingleside is genuine mountain country in miniature, a pup of the Great Dividing Range that somehow strayed down to the sea. As such it is lightning prone: whenever there is an electrical storm in the vicinity there seem to be lightning strikes somewhere up there; the house lines were hit on two separate occasions. And a gentle, playful zephyr down on the coast tends to be a rampaging gale on the heights.

The matter was once again urgent. Again I had to try to award priorities. It seemed unlikely that Snoopy was anywhere in the first valley, since there were houses, visible and audible, around the fringe, and she hadn't gone to them. From the stable I could hear the dogs and other noises from the Cicada Glen end of the block; she would have heard me calling from the same place, but she hadn't come.

The downstream part of the Chase, the central valley and beyond, was all new to me. Just one of those fatuous human traits, if something is right next door to you, you never bother to look at it. I knew from the map that the creek ran down into Pittwater, and on the map it didn't look very far. But the map shows only horizontal distance, not the added distance up the sides of steep hills.

I decided to go down to the end of Chiltern Road, then pick up Chiltern Walk and branch off to the right when I could find a way into the valley. From just over the crest of the ridge I could see a spot on the opposite side of the valley which, cabbage tree palms and all, was very similar to Newport, indeed probably what part of Newport would have been like before white settlement. I made for it, thinking that it was right on the creek, on the grounds that I had to start somewhere, and that seemed a likely place for Snoopy to have lingered, if she found herself down there. She would have had no idea how far she was from Newport - the travelling time, for her, to that spot, may well have been about the same. She could have stayed there, puzzled because she couldn't find the house, and depending on the possum population, perhaps settled in for lack of something better.

However, I didn't get there. From about half way down the land drops sharply to the creek, the whole being completely invisible from above. What appear, from the crest of the ridge, to be the tops of the trees beside the creek, are actually the tops of the trees growing on a level somewhere between fifty and a hundred feet above the bottom of the valley. It turned out to be twice as far down, and up the other side, as I had expected. By the time I finally got down to the creek it was nearly dark. I went a few yards up the opposite slope. Snoopy, if she were up there, should at least be able to hear me. That was the best I could do.

It was a dismal failure in all respects. While the obvious place to look for Snoopy was near the creek, to which she must come to drink, it was also the most impossible place to find her. The creek itself had grown dramatically in its proportions on the way through the valley, fed

as it was by numerous smaller streams in the folds of the hills. Near that spot it ran over a rock formation not unlike miniature rapids. Its rolling and roistering drowned out any of the soft rustlings made by nocturnal animals on their nightly rounds.

They were there, all right. Every time I moved I started a crashing panic in all directions. But I couldn't sit still and wait until I'd located something by ear, then put the torch on to identify it, as I normally did. The only thing I actually saw all night was a ring-tail, which took off, swooping wildly through the trees, squealing `Twitted- dee-twit!' at the top of its voice.

After a couple of such incidents I gave up. I was only distressing the wildlife to no purpose. At best I could only blunder a few yards through the darkness, anyway; the terrain was completely new to me, and I'd not had time to scout it thoroughly before night fell.

All I could do was wait shivering for the morning. It would have been close to suicide to try to find my way out in that sort of country in the dark, without first having checked the way thoroughly in the daylight. There'd been one or two places on the way down where the edge of a sheer drop of fifty feet or so was cunningly disguised by innocent looking bushes. I decided to follow the creek back if I really got into trouble - it was just as well I didn't, as it eventuated that there were some equally tricky places upstream.

I'd had a shrewd idea that I would be there for the night when the trek down took so long and proved so difficult, and I hadn't been particularly intimidated. I'd been in the scrub all night often enough to know that there's very little intrinsically dangerous about it; if you refrain from falling over a cliff, or walking on a snake, or something equally gormless, there's no reason why you shouldn't be there in the morning. A bushfire was a calculated risk: there was no lightning about, and most fires that start in other ways do so during the day, since they are generally man-made, directly or indirectly. I intended to be near the creek, which I knew from upstream alternated shallower stretches with deeper pools, often with overhanging banks, so I had some chance of escaping in the event that a fire did start; the fires which run through areas like that travel very quickly, and pass over a given point very quickly.

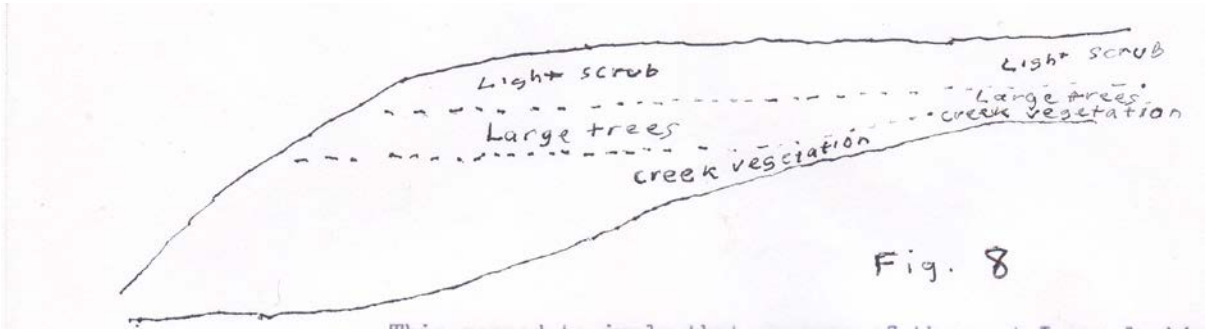
All of which is all very well. But winter had arrived, regardless of the calendar, and down there near the dank creek-bed it was very cold indeed. I had brought with me only what I usually carried, a torch, a shoulder bag with food, and a duffle coat. Till then this had been adequate, if not exactly sybaritic. I ended up practising my `survival techniques', including some I'd learnt from Snoopy herself, utilizing the brush as cover and curling up in the tightest possible ball, wrapped entirely in the coat, to conserve body heat.

When morning finally arrived, I had a good look round. The area looked more and more promising.

There were differences, in possum terms, from the country I knew upstream. Possums need two things, food and shelter. Upstream, at the head of the creek, the big gum trees of the sort which usually have convenient holes for possums grow right on the creek bank, in amongst the creek vegetation, so that shelter and a variety of food are available within a few yards of each other.

As the land dropped away, however, the larger trees tended to retain their height above sea level, so that by the time the creek reached the middle valley, there were three clearly defined vegetation zones, the smaller trees and lighter scrub, hakea and so forth, near the crest of the ridge, the larger trees with holes suitable for nests in the middle, and the

more luxuriant creek vegetation below, occupying the lowest couple of terraces:



This seemed to imply that possums of the sort I was looking for would need to travel further in the course of a night than those upstream, commuting backwards and forwards from the creek to the large trees. In consequence, the female territories should be larger, and less thoroughly policed. This in turn implied that there would be far more borderline areas where a possum such as Snoopy might be able to fit herself in, if she moderated her ambitions to suit her circumstances.

At any other time I would probably have been delighted to think of Snoopy settling down there. But if the area looked more and more promising, it also looked more and more inflammable. I had to try to think of a method of finding her, and getting her out, as soon as possible.

One look at the third valley, where it broadens out as it reaches the sea, convinced me that I would never be able to cover it in time. It would have taken months, if not years, and I needed results in days. However, McCarr's Creek Road runs along the shore at this point, passing over the creek just before it debouches into the bay, and there was a small group of houses on the opposite side of the road. I could hear the traffic from the road, and I would have to assume that if Snoopy were anywhere near that end of the creek she would go to one of the houses - I went round them and left my phone number at the first opportunity.

Further up the third valley she should still be able to hear me if I called from one of the ridges, trying to utilize the resonating pockets, preferably without too many confusing echoes, in the manner in which the ancient Greek actors utilized the resonating chambers built into their theatres, and, in places like Delphi, the natural resonating pockets in the surrounding hillsides. I couldn't hope to make a good job of this in a short time, since it requires a lot of practice and an intimate knowledge of the topography. But with a bit of experimentation I could make some sort of attempt, enough, I hoped, to cover the area, given a possum's acute sense of hearing.

Upstream in the middle valley, I would have to use a modified version of the same system, guessing the territories, and going to each in turn, zigzagging across the creek, always working upstream, leading the hypothetical possum back to the house, in case I missed her. For I couldn't work as I usually did, listening for a possum, then gradually moving towards the sound until I could identify it. The nature of the terrain precluded this.

In this sort of bush there are always pitfalls and traps for the unwary, holes and depressions a foot or so in diameter, covered with dead brush, or filled with undergrowth that grows to the same height as that on the surrounding ground level, then stops, so that the ground level appears to continue uninterrupted across the hole. Upstream, in the area I knew, I had most of the pitfalls pretty well charted; if I did make a mistake I

risked, at most, a sprained ankle. Down here it was more likely to be a drop of twenty feet or more, enough to debilitate, if not immediately fatal. And while I might not have cared too much on a strictly personal basis at that time, putting myself out of action was hardly conducive to getting Snoopy out of there.

It was all wrong, and I knew it at the time. The net result was that I was relying almost exclusively on the supposition that Snoopy would still come to my call, something like six weeks after she disappeared, when the memory would be fading and she would take even longer than ever to recognise me, at a time when I would otherwise be torn more than ever between looking for Snoopy and looking for a possum. But it was the best I could do.

There were other problems. In order to function down there at all I would have to spend a considerable time during the day getting to know the place where I intended to be that night. This meant that the house, and the phone, would be unattended for the better part of the day and night. The country seemed to be getting dryer and dryer by the minute. Already there had been fires elsewhere in the Chase, one close enough to scare the people at the end of Chiltern Road, as well as me. I decided to go down the Chase on a one day on, one day off basis, relying on the alternative phone numbers, and hoping that if anything came up in my absence it would not be urgent, or it would be something my parents could handle.

There were other complications, too. The weather was getting colder at night. The first night I was down there I found that I had all I could do just surviving without any long term after effects, let alone searching, using what I normally took. For the next few days I took a blanket, but very soon, and very reluctantly, changed to a sleeping bag with a rucksack to carry it. My sleeping bag was the old-fashioned variety, with only a partial side zipper, very good from the point of view of keeping out the cold, but very difficult to get out of in a hurry.

However, by that time I had discovered that I could not, in any case, maintain any degree of mobility: even surveying ahead during the day, I couldn't become familiar enough with more than a few square yards to move about in it with safety in the dark - I didn't stay in any one location long enough for that. At the same time I found myself in breach of one of the fundamental laws of nocturnal bushwalking. The country down there was fairly rugged, and I was knocking out a pair of sneakers or gym boots in two trips - they threatened to disintegrate on the way back, which would have left me in something of a predicament. Not having a suitable pair of heavy boots I had to buy one, locally and in a hurry, and as there were no hiking boots available I had to take a heavy pair of working boots, still a little too large under multiple pairs of socks. After sneakers, the new boots seemed to allow almost no feedback from the ground underfoot: I couldn't tell what I was walking on, and so had to proceed step at a time, with extreme caution.

Since I was effectively hobbled by the terrain, being hobbled by a sleeping bag in preference to being too numb with cold to even think effectively didn't seem too much of an added handicap.

There was no way in which I could even guess at the sort of inter-territorial niche that a possum like Snoopy might be able to fit herself into, but I thought I could make some sort of stab at the normal female territories by eye, based on the assumption that the possum in question would have to commute from the large trees to the creek. If I could get an idea of the territories then I could get a better idea where to look; by the same token, if I called from, say, each second territory for a couple of nights running, that should give Snoopy an opportunity to come to

me if she wanted to and were capable of doing so, since the owner couldn't stay in the same place all night.

Initially at least, I needed some compromise method between looking for a possum and looking for Snoopy. Except in the unlikely case of Snoopy popping out from a tree above my head the first time I called, I needed to know something about the local possums to know where to look, and I also wanted them to approach me without fear - I knew from my Newport experiences that if one possum comes, others will follow, even if personally antagonistic to the firstcomer, on the grounds that there is something there for possums. They just wait quietly in the background until the potential aggressor has left. I hoped that if Snoopy were there, but no longer recognised my call, she might come in the wake of the others.

So the possums were going to have to come to me. I couldn't go to them except within a very limited area, and, given those restrictions, I was unlikely to get a good enough look at them to identify or eliminate them if they didn't. With only limited space in which to move, I was bound to violate some of the basic rules if I went to them, giving the appearance of hunting them, or inadvertently getting into a position that gave them the impression that they were cornered. That would only keep them up in the highest branches of the trees, if it did not send them away entirely. I had made that mistake upstream, especially with Charon, and as a result had taken hours over an identification that should have taken minutes. I didn't intend to repeat the same mistake.

Behaving in a manner calculated to reassure them was easy enough in general terms. By this time I'd read Jane Goodall's *In the Shadow of Man*, and her initial experiences with the chimps seemed to make sense in the light of what I knew of the lower species of the Australian bush. While she chased after them, scrutinising them, they ran away, considering her as a potential predator, but when she pretended to ignore them, instead imitating their activities and trying to give the impression that she was just another peaceful sort of animal going about its normal routine, they decided it was safe to ignore her and proceed with their own daily round. This sounded very much like the dictum I had already evolved from my experiences upstream: as long as I had legitimate, non-predatory business of a sort that was comprehensible to other animals, they classified me as just another harmless local, and disregarded me. I hoped that if I ate, drank, and curled up, the local animals in the Chase would take me for just another animal that happened to be nesting there - even my calling should make some sense to the brush-tails as a possum crying its territory before settling down to sleep.

Getting them to approach close enough for identification was another matter. I knew from Newport that the way to make friends with a possum is to leave a present of food, then go away, so that it is obvious that there are no strings attached to the deal. After several days of that timid Foxy consented to come and collect the food while I was still there, as long as I didn't approach too closely.

But I couldn't go away, because the terrain wouldn't let me. And even if I could have, I couldn't spend a week trying to identify each possum. So I had to somehow `go away' and still be there in order to see the possum.

The only way I could think of of going away and simultaneously staying there was to go to sleep, to doze, genuinely but lightly enough to be wide awake at the first movement close by. A dormant creature is in some sense `not there'. I had certain compunctions, too, about feeding the animals in the Chase, even if it was only going to be a small treat that would not be repeated more than a couple of times, but desperation is the

mother of iniquity.

I had to start somewhere, so I picked a spot about half way between the big trees and the creek. At that point humans and other terrestrials have to go down and up the hard way, scrambling along beside the bank of a small feeder creek. But there was an obvious short cut from one level to the next for a possum: a tree, growing from the lower level, nearly touched the slightly projecting top of a cliff, which constituted the ground level of the terrace above. In other words, a possum escalator. There was a boulder against the foot of the tree, leaving a space for a sleeping bag between it and the cliff face, so I made that my headquarters.

After calling Snoopy from a nearby outcrop, I went back to the sleeping bag, had my dinner, then placed a selection of possum delicacies on top of the boulder, beside the tree trunk, about four feet from my head, and settled down to wait, getting up later in the night to call again.

The Lady of the Chase

The theory was at least partially correct. Even on the first night I heard the local wildlife resuming its normal business all around me, though it never came close enough to let me see it. The wallabies went thumping down to the creek by much the same tortuous route that I was forced to use, and there were various rustlings and scurryings in the bushes and trees themselves.

The second night, a possum duly appeared, and a female at that. I woke to the sound of Absolutely Delicious noises just above my head, and opened my eyes to see her sitting on the boulder, silhouetted against the sky.

As soon as I moved my hand towards the torch she started, and waited, poised for flight, for something like a minute before hesitantly resuming her meal. When I put the torch on she fled up the tree.

I had stupidly used the big torch which I normally carried. The animals upstream were used to that torch - it was certainly annoying, but it helped identify me, a known harmless local. I hadn't stopped to think that even the weakest light was going to prove alarming to these total strangers, and the strong lantern would be nothing short of disaster.

She tried again a couple of hours later, with the same result.

In the morning I set out another selection of food on the boulder - it seemed safe enough for her to come down there, since there was open ground, with no cover for a predator, for some yards around, and she was right against the trunk of the tree. So I left her something for her uninterrupted delectation the following night, and returned to the house to keep the phone company for the next twenty-four hours.

The night after that I returned, this time with a smaller torch as well. I followed the same routine, but went to sleep with the torch in my hand, pointing towards the boulder, so that no unnecessary movements would alarm her before I got a better look at her. From what little I had seen on my previous visit I was fairly certain that she wasn't the possum I was looking for. This time she was slightly less nervous, and allowed me a longer inspection, but took off as soon as I tried to move closer to check the detail. But she came back later, and by the end of the night I was sure she was none of mine.

Her face markings were entirely new to me, and somewhat grotesque in their appearance. In retrospect they may have been a selective, more exaggerated version of Charon's, or those of the creek group near Cicada Glen Road, but they were totally different from those of the groups I was used to, and she herself bore no resemblance to any possum I had ever met before.

However, I decided to go back there for one more night. I had the impression that there was another possum hanging around in the

background, not daring to approach while the territory holder was in the vicinity, exactly what I would have expected Snoopy to do if she had been in the neighbourhood.

Probably I was not uninfluenced by the fact that after my recent experiences upstream, it was nice to meet someone who didn't project hatred in my direction as soon as I appeared. This lady, on the contrary, seemed quite pleased to see me, once she got over her initial diffidence - after all, I brought the dinner. By the third night she was no longer alarmed if I wandered around putting the torch on her when she was in the trees in the level above, as I did when she seemed to be engaged in a middle distance altercation with some other possum in that vicinity. She tolerated it for quite some time before becoming thoroughly disgusted and hiding, vanishing completely, as Erik had done with his famous camouflage trick on the lawn.

I doubt whether even she was an unspoilt child of nature. Whether she was a relocated suburbanite, or whether, as is more likely, she had occasionally benefitted from the untidiness of weekend hikers, the alacrity and deftness with which she located and pounced on the food I put out suggest an expert nose.

In the event, her taste of the high life lasted only five nights. I would have liked to have gone back some time, for a friendly visit, with no strings attached, but the opportunity never arose.

I did not see the other possum, if indeed there was one - it may have been a juvenile offspring, or the boyfriend, of the one I met. But it had ample opportunity to come, if it was she rather than I that it was afraid of, after she had departed for the night.

I had lingered too long already, for I had made yet another discovery about the vagaries of the hill-and-valley acoustics. As soon as I got high enough above the creek so that its noise did not drown out everything else, I started to hear sounds from upstream, where our house was located, not so much sounds from the Cicada Glen end of the block, as in the first valley - that area was, I think, lower by comparison with the spot on the ridge where I was - but from the higher, Mona Vale Road end of the block. I could identify the barks of dogs I knew lived there, and at that time of day those dogs were usually confined near their houses.

I could also hear the traffic on Mona Vale Road. In fact there was nowhere where I could be out of earshot of both Mona Vale Road and McCarr's Creek Road, and one place where I could hear both.

In addition, there were sounds from the houses on the western ridge, along the eastern side of the extension of Chiltern Road. Anywhere along the slopes and (as I later discovered) on the spur of the western ridge which cuts off the top of the middle valley, Snoopy could have identified those sounds better than I, and followed them back to civilization.

While there would undoubtedly have been dead pockets, it was unlikely, though certainly possible, that she kept exclusively to them. This meant that, with an ever-decreasing time limit, I should give priority to the places from which upstream was not only invisible but inaudible.

That cut down the area I would have to search, but I can't say that I was overjoyed. It also cut down on the number of possible places where Snoopy might be, still alive and in reasonable condition.

As far as I could guess, what was going on was something like this. There is a dog-leg to the left in the course of the creek, according to the map, below the entrance to the middle valley. The sounds from the Mona Vale Road end of the block must have been striking some part of the right, or eastern ridge, then, amplified, rebounding across the corner of the dog-leg to the flank of the western, or left-hand, ridge, where I had

taken up my position.

Rightly or wrongly, I decided that I would be audible, if not visible, if I concentrated on the slope of the eastern ridge.

I went back to the `territory' where I had vainly camped beside the creek, moving a little further up the hill, to the start of the cabbage tree palms. Before settling down there for the evening I went down to the entrance of the third valley, and called from that side too.

There was no-one in that particular part of the Chase that had any interest in coming to me. Once again I heard rustlings in the trees, but no-one claimed the food I left out. On consideration I decided that if Snoopy had been over there, she would have come to me on the other side, so I prepared to move upstream.

One intermediate site proved unfruitful, and then, given the terrain, it seemed that I could reasonably assume that the lower part of the middle valley had been covered.

I had been scouting ahead during the day, and it was evident that, even if my hypothesis about larger territories was correct, there were still too many for me to cover in a reasonable time.

Upstream, I think in the first part of the dog-leg, above the second falls and a little downstream from where I found steps belonging to one of the hiking tracks, I noticed possum droppings.

Not to put too fine a point on it, possum droppings vary in appearance according to the possum's diet. Those of the lady downstream had coarse, fibrous vegetable inclusions, like the droppings of the other animals in her vicinity. These, on the other hand, were smooth and discrete, like those of Snoopy and the possums upstream.

If this did not mean that there was an upstream possum in the neighbourhood, at least it implied that there was a possum who habitually chose to eat a selection of vegetation which coincided with the selection available upstream.

I intended to try the spot that night. But the terrain was particularly rugged, and the cartilage in one of my knees, which had been loosened many years before and continued to give trouble now and then, had started to twinge after I scrambled up a bit which put a lateral strain on the knee-joint, in a manner which usually presaged imminent misbehaviour. And I was dog-tired.

I told myself that nothing was likely to happen that same night, at least it was no more likely to happen than on any other night. It would be more sensible to go home, get some rest, and give my knee a chance to recover. I suspect that I was actually procrastinating, putting off checking, and in all likelihood eliminating, what seemed to be the last good chance of finding Snoopy alive.

So I squibbed it, that night. The next day it started to rain, and rained torrentially, if anything worse than the first few days after Snoopy disappeared. And it continued to rain like that for the best part of a week.

There was absolutely nothing I could do. It was useless going down the Chase, even if I managed to get where I was going without breaking my neck. I could neither see nor hear what was going on, nor could I be seen or heard, or, I am sure, even smelt. And the possums would be tucked away in their nests, making only the briefest of sorties, to snatch enough food to keep them going.

As soon as the weather broke enough for the downpour to be called showers, I set off for the closest part of the area, the first valley, walking in via the stables. I had little hope of that area: the houses were too close and too conspicuous. But, since I was unable to do

anything more constructive - if I went down into the second valley, and the weather closed in, I would be unable to get back out in the dark and so denied even the unpromising alternative of phone-watching - I picked what looked like a suitable possum place and started on my routine.

And down came the rain again. In the scrub around Sydney there is almost always something a human can use as an emergency shelter, a rock ledge, a thick bush, even a fallen tree. But, for heaven knows what reason, there wasn't a thing within a hundred yards of where I was, and I had no time to explore beyond. The best I could do was cram my head, and as much as I could of my body, under a log, hoping my sleeping bag would protect the rest.

It didn't work, of course. The log developed a network of rivulets and streams, channelling the water into the only area big enough for me to get into at all. And my sleeping bag is warranted against showers, not a deluge. Within half an hour not only the sleeping bag but each and every one of my several layers of clothing was saturated.

Then the rain stopped, as suddenly as it had begun. It was quite ludicrous. The clouds cleared away, and the stars were positively beaming down. Any minute the possums would be out, overjoyed at the respite and too happy to be over-particular about being seen. And there was I, dripping from every portion of my anatomy, shivering uncontrollably in the chill winter air.

I am no great bushwalker. I have always preferred being there, and lazily eschewed the more energetic part of the package, getting there. But I've been out often enough to know there is only one possible course of action under such circumstances: keep moving until you can get into dry clothes and thaw out, and make that as soon as possible.

So I trudged back to the house, with my own muttered imprecations and expletives as a marching song. Very funny, Huey.

The way in from the stables lay through an area of dense shrubbery, riddled with `wallaby tracks', including some presumably genuine wallaby routes, high enough to give the impression of tracks suitable for humans, then, apparently, mysteriously petering out in dead ends. Being me, I went round in several circles before I finally managed to get through. By the time I got back to the house and changed and defrosted, there was no question of returning that night.

The next day I bought a tent. As I go bushwalking only once a blue moon, camping gear of this order had always been something I was going to get one day when I could afford it, so I possessed only the basics. I had, in any case, rejected the idea of taking a tent before.

It seemed to me that while a lone human curled up among the rocks might pass for just another animal that happened to be nesting there, a tent is a structure, however flimsy and impermanent, and everything in its sense would take one look and go for miles, Snoopy not least of all, since she had never seen a tent; so far from smelling reassuringly familiar, like the rest of my equipment, it would carry the strong, totally unfamiliar smell of freshly purchased camping gear.

However, I seemed to have no option, if I wanted to continue searching: the weather seemed confirmed in its intention of continuing in the same vein indefinitely, alternating clear breaks with torrential downpours against which there is no other defence.

I was right the first time, with a vengeance. The tent I bought, for obvious reasons, was a cheap, light, translucent nylon affair: it happened to be blue. Whenever I lit a lamp inside, or even shone the torch in through the door to find something, the whole area, for yards around, was suffused with an eerie blue glow.

Everyone must have thought the Martians had landed.

The only things bold enough, or foolhardy enough, to follow their noses to the food I put out were the inevitable, perky little bush-rats.

I spent most of the night huddled in the tent, wishing my sleeping bag had dried out.

In any case, the area was not in the least promising. When the rain was not so heavy that it was impossible to see more than a few feet, the lights from the houses further up Cicada Glen Road were clearly visible.

I tried going back to the stables, just to make sure. But once again I was rained out, and spent most of the time skulking in a corner of a feed shed, cursing the weather. In the middle of the night something, whether rat or possum, slipped quietly up beside me and stole a piece of fruit I had put out, but it had vanished along with its prize by the time I got the torch on.

Eventually the weather did clear decisively, and I was able to return downstream. Needless to say, I left the tent behind.

Apart from the fact that it was obviously the last thing I needed on a project such as this, tents are bad on principle, if you are wandering round the bush at night alone. Aside from your own stupidity, the only thing likely to harm you is a stray rogue human, but they do exist.

There are as many definitions of intelligence as there are definers, but one, certainly, is the ability to modify or override innate behaviour patterns as the situation demands, to think, and act, as individuals. The more intelligent a species as a whole, the greater the percentage of those individuals who will differ from their fellows, in ways which their fellows find unpleasant, subjectively speaking, wrong 'uns. Man is th most intelligent species in this neck of the woods, and so has the highest proportion of wrong 'uns.

If you blend into the surroundings, the chances of such a one stumbling over you are remote, but a tent is like a house: it advertises the fact that there is something there for humans.

I returned to the spot where I suspected there was an upstream type possum, rather more sanguine about my prospects of success than I had been for some time.

The whole aspect of the place had changed. I needed to have no fears about a holocaust for some time to come. The dead wood and brush, the fuel, had been swept out by the inundation as cleanly as if a bulldozer had been through, followed up selectively by a brush hook.

But it wasn't only the fuel which had gone.

I tried the spot I had located before the rain, and then a little downstream, and a little upstream, and I neither saw nor heard anything remotely like a possum. There were no signs of possums, droppings, scratches on trees, or anything else that I could detect. When I left food up a tree, out of the normal reach of bush-rats, it just stayed there, for one or even two days, until it disintegrated and fell to the ground, where it remained.

While there was no reason to suppose that the possums, if Snoopy were not one of them, should be as forthcoming as the lady downstream, there was no reason to suppose that they would be so reticent, either. I should have at least heard them, at a distance, if they were there.

The only sign of nocturnal life I encountered was when, through lack of space where I was putting myself, I stowed my pack under a ledge, and returned to find the ropes gnawed through, and the straps decidedly nibbled around the edges; unbeknownst to me the ledge also sheltered a thriving colony of bush-rats, who were, no doubt, delighted to find dinner

brought to their door.

And the only animal I saw during the day was a dog with staring ribs, trotting along in the manner of a dog following its normal daily routine.

What with this, the other half-starved dogs I had seen roaming around the fringes of the Chase, the fire danger, the shots I used to hear from the direction of the Chase every so often as long as I lived at Ingleside, and the screams I heard every time I was in the Chase, always from the other side of the hill, or too far away through impossible terrain for me to get there and check in less than an hour, I had quite changed my mind about it being the sort of place I would like Snoopy to choose if she decided to declare independence.

I tried on the other, western side of the creek, though the acoustics made it an unlikely spot. A wallaby thumped past me on the way down to the creek, and that was all. Somehow I had the impression that there were possums around, though I neither heard nor saw anything to justify this. Probably it was based on nothing more than the conviction that there ought to be possums: by this time I was far enough upstream for there to be sizeable trees in close proximity to the creek, and it reminded me of the area I knew near the house - ideal possum country, positively crying out for possums.

The simple fact of the matter was that there had been possums there before the rains, but now they were gone. And there were no prizes for guessing why.

After heavy rains, particularly if the rains are followed by winds, all the trees which have been gradually weakened over the years tend to come down. The same applies to sandstone cliffs and rock shelters which have stood for centuries, in some cases thousands of years. Always there is one last straw, one final factor that determines precisely when a tree or rock will reach the point of no return and collapse, and it is weather such as this which most often gives that final impetus. After heavy rains, it is always a case of `look before you sleep', even more than `look before you leap' in the bush: children brought up in the scrub learn this along with `never go into the bush with bare feet'.

But after my experience over recent years I was able to be more specific about what this means in possum terms. The trees which most frequently provide holes for possums to live in, the dead trees, are the most unstable, the most vulnerable, and usually among the first to go. After them, the sorts of live trees which most frequently shelter possums are the big blue gums, like Snoopy's first tree upstream. After bad weather, huge limbs or secondary trunks, tend to split off from the blue gums - this happened to Snoopy's tree during the last period of bad weather before her disappearance. The limbs tend to split off at weak points, and the holes used by possums, often located down in the forks, tend to constitute such weak points, as happened in the case of Bindi's tree.

The large red gums, the angophoras, remain intact. The whole tree comes down.

Even the rock ledges which, as I knew from Newport, serve as camping places at least, tend to split off after such weather.

The possums had gone, because their nests had gone. No doubt some few remained, somewhere in the vicinity, but none that were going to make themselves known to me. In all probability they will be back by now, but for the time being they had gone, and Snoopy, if she had been amongst them, was gone along with them.

The question was, where?

If Snoopy had gone down the creek, then she must, once she got

over the first panic, have known that home was up the creek. But by the middle valley Cicada Creek is considerably augmented by the feeder creeks along the way. Especially after the torrential rains, it resembled a young river rather than the comparatively insignificant trickle Snoopy was used to. Its miniature tributaries would now have looked more like the creek she knew. This had been on my mind all the time I was down there, and when there was no other indication I had selected spots near the feeder creeks running down the flanks of both ridges.

Snoopy had not come back up Cicada Creek. If she had done so she would have got home, or to one of the neighbouring houses. If she had gone up one of the tributaries on the western ridge, she would eventually turn back. That way there is only Ku-ring-gai Chase, with no houses to attract a suburbanite possum. In any case there was nothing I could do about it: the area was too vast.

If she had gone up any of the creeks on the eastern ridge of the first valley, she would have encountered the houses on the recurve of Cicada Glen Road, but the tributaries further downstream, in the area where I had been searching, would lead her into an area still covered with bush. Ultimately, if she kept going, she would strike the houses on the roads running along the crest of the ridge, towards Church Point.

So that seemed to be the place to look.

THE POSSUMS OVER THE HILL

I started going door to door along the roads running on top of the eastern ridge, with no immediate success. But it very soon became clear that what had happened in the Chase had happened everywhere else as well. The trees had come down all over the district, and as well the sort of human structures, abandoned shacks, old sheds and the like, which possums frequent in less civilized areas had suffered in similar manner. Possums everywhere were on the move, displaced stronger possums throwing out weaker possums in a chain reaction which had spread across the entire district. Possums were appearing and disappearing, here, there, everywhere in daylight, in places they had never previously been seen. The road toll went up again - I stopped keeping count of the bodies, checking what I could and ignoring the rest. The weather had created a kind of pseudo-mating season situation in midwinter.

I renewed the newspaper ads., with the same result as before - kind people ringing up from everywhere with what proved to be false alarms, but no success.

Finally a very helpful lady on the road running along the eastern crest, towards the Church Point end, remembered an incident something like three months before: while there was no possum regularly visiting her, a possum had come to the bedroom window one rainy night, obviously asking to come in out of the cold. Her house, like all the others in the vicinity, had a large water tank, and this one was situated in respect to the windows, particularly the bedroom window, in the same relationship as those at the house at Ingleside.

It was the sort of thing I was expecting. After a long absence from home, Snoopy, her memories fading, might well try a house which provided the same stimuli, the same key objects in the same relationships, in the hope that it was the right one.

The timing, as always, was problematical. Once I saw Cicada Creek in flood, looking utterly unlike the same creek that flowed past the house, the thought occurred to me that what was happening then in respect of possums might well also have happened immediately after Snoopy disappeared, when, too, there was torrential rain. I didn't know whether I was looking for a possum who left the Chase a couple of weeks before, or something like three months before, assuming she was ever there.

But I did know that I was not looking for a possum who appeared before the 10th of April. The trouble is that you just don't remember dates unless you have reason to do so. But the lady was extremely understanding, and by trying to relate the incident to other events, in terms of before and after, we managed to arrive at a date something like ten days to two weeks after Snoopy disappeared.

That was very tight. Travelling in a straight line, and heading for a specific goal, Snoopy could of course have gone much further in that time. But to get to the place at all, she must have gone by something like the route I projected, and I would have expected it to take longer, given that a lot of aimless wandering, through country devoid of houses, and large house groups to hound her on her way were required. There were a couple of house groups en route, but not very many that I'd heard of. It was possible, but only just.

The possum had, of course, never returned. So I enquired at neighbouring houses.

It eventuated that there was a sizeable house group a couple o doors away, members of which also visited a house on the further side of the one where the possum came to the window, while others, as I saw for myself, crossed the road, which was comparatively quiet at that point, and visited a house on the other side, where some of them resided.

The people in the house where the main group congregated were very sympathetic. They knew only the long-term established possums as individuals - and Snoopy, if she were with a group, would have been a diffident fringe dweller. But they invited me to come and have a look for myself, as in fact did the other people in the houses in question.

At first the possums seemed a little reluctant to approach a stranger, particularly one who showed such an intense, and so suspect, interest in them. But there was one old male - I think his name was Charley - who reminded me very much of Old Pink Pig at Newport, a typically good-natured, easy going, friendly old fellow, tolerant of absurdly ill-mannered humans, who'd learnt by hard experience that if he was too circumspect about waiting till all was serene before coming for his dinner, the ladies would be down on top of him before he'd finished.

He came, tentatively at first, then more confidently, as it became apparent that all I was going to do was provide new varieties of delicacy. He even let me touch him, though he was a trifle leery about that. But he tolerated it - probably took me for someone who'd never seen a possum before, and just had to touch it - and I made a point of patting him, since the others were sitting up the trees, watching. When they saw that he came to no harm, they came down for their tea, though none was quite as bold as Charley.

I could not find Snoopy among them, although I waited until they had all come and gone, and then moved into the adjacent trees to see if there were any too frightened of the others to come till later. But while I was waiting for them I gazed at the view from the back veranda - and found myself looking straight out across Pittwater at Newport. I could identify the area where my parents' house was located, Snoopy's other nest.

Many, if not most, female possums have two nests - Foxy, Honey, and, as I later discovered, Battered Baby, at Newport, Kylie and Bindi at Ingleside - situated in different parts, and probably at opposite ends, of their respective territories. Even Jenny used to commute from one end of the house to the other, until her adult daughters started to occupy the available places in one end as their own main nests.

Snoopy, too, had two nests, her main one at Ingleside, and her ancillary one in my room at Newport. This too had been at the back of my

mind all along - if she found herself unable to get to her main home, she might try to go to her alternative nest. She would have thought it was about twenty minutes' travelling time away, since she'd always gone by car or bike. But I couldn't see how she would know in which direction to head. I had always taken her by Mona Vale Road, something I now regretted, but the back route, if safer for possums, was certainly more hair-raising for bikes, and longer in time, and I hadn't wanted to risk an accident with Snoopy aboard. Snoopy had headed off in the direction of Mona Vale Road on at least two previous occasions, and found that twenty minutes or so's travelling time only got her to an impossible place.

She might have got the general direction by ear. As I mentioned earlier, Ingleside seems to be about double earshot from Newport, to human hearing. But all she could get would be the general direction, the aerial direction, as it were. If she had started out from the neighbourhood of the house at Ingleside, going by that alone, the configuration of the terrain would have defeated her before she had gone a mile. She would have become hopelessly lost.

However, if she had happened, for different reasons, to come up one of the feeder creeks and over the crest of the hill, that was an entirely new situation. While what I could see of Newport was unlikely to mean anything to her, she could certainly hear sounds across the water, far better than I. And Pittwater itself must be one of the most unmistakeable landmarks in the district, from a possum's point of view, visually, auditorially and from an olfactory viewpoint.

I do not mean that she could have distinguished Pittwater from any other similar body of water - if she was miraculously transported up or down the coast to the environs of a similar inlet, no doubt she would take it for Pittwater. But the real Pittwater was the only such place anywhere where she was likely to have gone, and there was no mistaking it for anything else.

Snoopy would know Pittwater, and she would know its relationship to the place at Newport. I do not know that possums know left from right, but they must certainly know this side of their body from that side, in order to orientate themselves. There is always some small discrepancy or distinguishing mark, with Snoopy more than most. She would know that when she was at Newport, and the sound of the surf from Newport Beach was on this side of her body, Pittwater was on that side. It wasn't, so she was on the wrong side of the bay.

Seeing how far it was, she might very well have tried to settle down rather than attempt the journey. But now, with the increase in houses, the possum groups were becoming larger, and closer together. If Snoopy couldn't hold her own territory against her granddaughter without my help, I cannot see how she could have won and held a new territory in such circumstances. Once the hectic activity of the mating season was over she may have been able to stay for a while on the fringe of a group, but then the upheaval caused by the rain would have driven her on again. She would be hounded from group to group, and, whenever she was forced to move, headed in the general direction of Newport, always expecting it to be just over the next rise, or round the next corner.

So once again it was a matter of groups and routes, but this time at least with a general goal. By this time I had found it necessary to mark the groups on my street directory as I went; after a great deal of consideration, I have included a rough copy taken from it.[xxxi]

For looking down from Bayview Heights, I could see what I was in for. There were as many as fifty houses in the same area where previously there had been ten. Snoopy could choose any one of them, before being

forced to move on, and try any one of the fifty in the next group of houses along the route. I was going to have to try to go to as many houses possible, but there was no way in which I could cover them all. I was going to have to act on whatever wild surmise was available to me, if as few as two separate pieces of evidence, almost certainly from separate jigsaw puzzles, neither of them in any way connected with Snoopy, could, by some gargantuan stretch of the imagination, be fitted together to form a consistent whole. In other words, I would have to award priorities, another series of decisions, almost certainly wrong decisions, based on inadequate information. And I would know this even while it was happening.

But it was all I could do. So I would have to do it, and because, as years of experience had taught me that nothing short of total commitment is ever effective in such cases, I would have to make myself believe that each promising sighting really was Snoopy, and act accordingly, and face up to the inevitable disappointment.

Snoopy wasn't among the group of possums at the house overlooking the bay. I had suspected as much, since it wasn't in character for her not to try to draw human attention to herself when she was in difficulties. I have a dim memory of the lady from the house where the possum came to the window ringing me back later to say that a possum, which wasn't Snoopy, had shown up again, though whether it was the same possum that had come before she couldn't of course be sure. It could well have been Charley.

So, with nothing else to go on, I had to assume that Snoopy had once again been shunted on, and that she was heading in the general direction of Newport. I started going round the roads leading down towards the shore, giving preference to those branching off from the southern end of the road running along the crest, the end closer both to Ingleside and to the end of the bay, the way to Newport by foot. Even if, as seemed likely, Snoopy was not the possum involved in the incident I had heard about, she might well have come over the crest further back, and the same arguments, with regard to Newport, would apply.

Eventually I found someone who had in fact seen a possum, and one that sounded even more like Snoopy. Again it was a matter of a possum who acted as Snoopy would have done in the presence of the same stimuli, the same key physical objects. The lady was about my height and build, and she wore her hair in pigtails, like mine, the pigtails Snoopy used to hang on to when she was on my shoulder, which must have been one of my most significant features from her point of view, one of the collection of key items which together formed the picture of the `me' she identified. To human eyes, this lady and I looked nothing alike, but Snoopy, after wandering lost for weeks would have thought she looked very much like me.

I knew from Newport that possums tend to conflate similar humans who perform the same functions in respect to them - as far as a good many of the Newport tribe were concerned, my mother and I were a single corporate entity. I would have expected Snoopy to remember me longer, but after weeks of fruitless searching she might well be trying humans who bore what to her was an important resemblance to me, just as she might well be trying houses that had at least some of the key objects in the correct relationship, and just as I was at least trying any possum who sounded at all like Snoopy.

The incident had occurred approximately three months before - and by this time that gave Snoopy plenty of time to get to the place in question. A possum had inexplicably appeared one evening, come across the ground to the lady, and, as she expressed it, `put up its arms like a baby to be picked up.'

That could be one of two things. It's a standard begging

gesture used by some of the Newport possums. It was also, from the time she was a feeble baby, pathetically trying to follow at my heels, to the last time I saw her, the gesture Snoopy used when she did, indeed, want to be picked up.

So it might have been a wandering houseling asking for food. Or it might have been Snoopy, weary, bewildered and frightened, after weeks of travelling, thinking that at last she had found me again, asking me to pick her up and take her inside.

The possum had been received as sympathetically as circumstances had permitted. Fortunately the lady had not tried to pick the possum up - she knew enough to realise that the similarity to the human gesture might be illusory. It was just as well: picking up an adult possum is the deadliest insult you can offer, and if the gesture, on that particular occasion, does not mean `pick me up', then mayhem is bound to follow. At the very least the possum will struggle, and fourteen non-retractable razor-sharp claws can do a lot of harm by accident. At this point a human crisis had supervened, but the lady came back later and tried to find the possum, to give it something to eat.

If the possum had stayed, and I could somehow have discreetly established that it was Snoopy, I think I would have settled for that. If Snoopy thought she had found me again, and managed to make her home in a very good place for possums, with sympathetic human beings, then I had no business interfering, or disillusioning her. But the possum had, of course, disappeared, never to return again.

Later, when I was back-tracking during the lulls, as it were, between going round the area door to door and receiving replies - they always seem to come from the people who were out when I called, but were kind enough to take the trouble to ring in answer to the notes I left - I found an intermediate sighting back on the fringe of Ingleside, which made the route to this second house above Bayview, given the topography and demography, at least slightly more credible.

By the same token I also discovered a nearby house group, which provided ample alternative candidates, in the form of migrating juveniles. From the human point of view, one would never even suspect that the two houses were close together: they were literally miles apart by road - to get to from the upper house to the lower house, one had to go down to the shore, drive a considerable way along it, then come back up the hill by a circuitous route. But for a possum, it was a matter of a few hundred yards, straight through the bush.

The possums who frequented the lower house were a thoroughly uninhibited collection, as brash as the Newport mob. Nice possums, in all probability commuting between the houses of nice people, who instinctively understood them The lady who was, so to speak, their den mother, was someone with whom I felt a kindred spirit. Her experiences with possums, other than with hand-reared babies, were similar to mine, as were her observations about them; she had to contend with similar problems, not least trying to persuade her visitors to respect her prized possessions, and had the same deplorable tendency, when it came to the crunch, to rate unique individuals above replaceable inanimate objects; she had even picked the same tortuous path through the bibliography, finding the books available then, as I had, either lamentably meagre or manifestly inapplicable, save only Paule Ridpath's *Possum Moods*. I remember her saying, with a note of exasperation, not to say desperation in her voice, `But they don't always have twins, do they?'[xxxii]

However, that encounter lay in the future. The possum which had, apparently, asked to be picked up, had departed three months before,

and the question was, where did it go? I looked down the hill, and there were hundreds upon hundreds of houses. I had to somehow make up three months.

When Snoopy first disappeared, two newspapers, attracted by the oddity of the advertisement for a possum, rang me to see if there was a story in it. At the time, I had to say no. That was the very time when wider publicity was proving counter-productive: the area immediately surrounding us did not get newspapers delivered, and I was being drawn away, following up reports from further afield that really weren't very likely, when there appeared to be nothing else to do, only to find when I returned that something far more important had happened close by. Much as I wanted to, I couldn't subdivide like an amoeba. If I had allowed any of that sort of publicity, my predicament would have become worse: more calls from unlikely places would have come in, and I would still, unless I was actually watching a possum close by, have had to give them priority, since they were almost always urgent, and the animal in question often in danger. I simply couldn't look after all the possums in the world: I had to concentrate on trying to look after Snoopy.

Now I could have used that publicity, but I couldn't think how to get it. For a start, the story was cold. And secondly, Snoopy's problem was so inseparably bound up with basic possum behaviour patterns, which just aren't widely known: some sort of summary of those behaviour patterns had to be included. It was then that I started to write this. I tried to précis it to a reasonable length, but there was too much that was too obscure. And I had already discovered for myself that any single partial explanation antagonised, or at least alienated, more people than it persuaded. I always had to tell a different part of the story, in answer to the questions of the people I met.

I was going to have to go round the houses in person, in any case, to make sure <u>all</u> the houses in the critical places got the message; too often the people where the possum showed up hadn't seen my ads, while the people in the houses on either side had. Rightly or wrongly I gave priority to searching in person.

I had no chance of covering all the likely places. I still had to assume that Snoopy, if it were she, was heading for Newport, look at the country, try to guess feasible possum routes, where the next main group should be, then skip on ahead, trying to catch up time. And even then, I had to assume that Snoopy was not only heading for Newport, but managed to work out the correct way. For while she would have known that she was on the wrong side of the bay, she may not have been able to tell, as I could, that in order to get to the other side she had to veer to the right, roughly south-east, and work around the shore line via Mona Vale. She could just as easily have turned left, and tried to work around the shore that way, heading in the direction of Church Point.

If Snoopy knew which way to go, if she were heading for Newport, if the possum `asking to be picked up' were indeed Snoopy and not some other possum, if she had followed the feeder creeks up out of the Chase, as I hypothesized, sped on her way by local groups, if she had ever been in the Chase at all! It hurt my academic soul to entertain so nebulous an hypothesis, composed of so many tenuously concatenate suppositions, let alone act on it. But it was all I had to go on, and the time factor meant that it was just one of those situations where you have to assume a sciolist attitude, presume that you are omniscient and whatever reconstruction you have dreamed up is correct, and act accordingly, all the while agonisingly aware of the fallacies of the theory.

I was not looking forward to it. I could see that I was going

to have to knock on literally hundreds of doors, talk to hundreds of people. I have always, as they say, related far better to other species than to my peer group. I cringe inwardly at the thought of meeting one stranger. The prospect of meeting hundreds did not attract me in the least.

In addition, I had certain moral qualms. At one stage in my chequered career of scholarships, grants, deferred grants, leaves-of-absence and so forth, I had found it necessary, shy or not, to take a part-time job with a market research firm, going door-to-door, as the only way of eating. And I came to loathe it.

The firm I worked for was thoroughly reputable, indulged in none of the devious tactics employed by some less creditable organizations, and allowed as frank and honest approach as was consistent with the nature of the questionnaire - a psychologically structured set of questions. And a good many people I met enjoyed the whole performance, considering it a good afternoon's divertissement. Nevertheless, the fact remained that I was being paid to bother people. The very act of ringing the doorbell was an invasion of privacy, an imposition. By placing my physical person in that position I was forcing people, for however brief a time, to orientate their thoughts and actions by me and not by their own preoccupations, even if it was only for the time it took to say, `No, thank you.' That is a form of emotional imperialism.

Emotional imperialism is something in which we all indulge, unavoidably. It runs the full gamut from writing a book which people can read or not read, buy or not buy, keep or slam shut half-finished and throw into the wastepaper basket, or out the window, or down the dunny, according to their own predilections, to pointing a gun at someone's head and demanding that they should embrace the True Belief, be it Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Communism, Democracy or whatever. But it is nevertheless something which I find personally abhorrent, and which I avoid, beyond the mildest literary form, whenever possible.

What I was asking, that people should accept a card with a series of phone numbers on it, against a very unlikely contingency, seemed to be a comparatively mild form. But it was still, undeniably, a breach of the principle. I had a choice of either knowingly violating the principle to that extent, or just walking away, knowing that there was still a remote possibility that Snoopy was still being driven from group to group, calling at places that somehow reminded her of home, thinking that at last she had got back, only to be disappointed, and driven still further.

The choice wasn't really a choice.

Furthermore, I knew that I was going to have to explain, to go over the most harrowing parts of the story again and again, with the majority of people I met. And I already knew what that would be like: the effect, so far from cathartic, was more likely to be obsessive; each time I thought of new and even worse possibilities.

With all this in mind I set out on the last phase of the search. And I was amazed to find just how kind people really are.

Not only did they accept the phone numbers, they let me take extraordinary liberties, not only with their properties but even with their roofs, if there seemed any possibility that Snoopy might be on the premises. Those that had possum groups which came close enough to be identified checked them for me themselves, or invited me to come and look for myself. People offered to ask their neighbours for me, to save me time, and some even sent their children off to ask up and down the street, and alerted anyone else they knew in the district who might be on the route - on at least one occasion I remember `catching up with myself', as it were, calling at a house where the people had already been told the story by friends in

another suburb, whose house I had previously called at, back along the way.

Of course some people no doubt thought I was mad, but that didn't stop them from trying to help. In a sense they were right, even laying aside the sanity or otherwise of trying to help a friend who happens to belong to a different species. I was a basically sane, if decidedly overwrought, human being, but in order to look for a possum effectively, I had to submit myself to the behaviour patterns of an entirely different species: I had to keep possum hours; I had to view the landscape from a possum's point of view, so that I could follow possum routes; and then I had to look even more closely, with possum eyes, to see the sort of places which were suitable for a possum, specifically Snoopy, to stay in. In a sense, I had to become a possum, knowing all the while that I was nothing of the sort.

When I used to go out at night with Snoopy, making a brief excursion into her world, it was fun, something I did voluntarily, for a short time, in the same spirit that she sometimes entered my world, investigating and asking me to explain things like showers and typewriters. And each of us in turn was a willing cicerone. For the most part, our interaction took place in overlapping areas, in the lounge, with the chairs, or the bedroom, with its furniture, in a physical space which had different, but equally pleasant and reconcilably similar significance for us both. So no one was forced to compromise her psychology. Being compelled to live in the possum world, interminably, alone, without Snoopy, was a different matter. If anyone was ever *e natura* in this whole saga, it was me, then.

At times like this, the ability to stand back and watch yourself act does not help, either. It only makes you feel even more like a puppet.

Nor did it help that I saw possum after possum. When it was one of the few who were in distress, it broke my heart, because I couldn't stop to even try to do something about it; when it was one of the many who were living happily, thoroughly adjusted to their surroundings, I couldn't help looking at them and wishing it was Snoopy who was safe and content in her own territory.

After Joey disappeared, the possums I met brought me a great deal of comfort and reassurance, because I learnt from them that I was wrong, and there was nothing necessarily sinister about his disappearance. He had the same chance, no better, no worse, as any other juvenile male. But this time, all I saw went to confirm that I was right, at least insofar as the fundamentals were concerned. And it was the fundamentals that were condemning Snoopy to a wretched life and a wretched death.

For in all the possums I saw, there was something of Snoopy, and something of the others I had met. The possums over the hill turned out to be much the same possums as those I had known.

The basic behaviour patterns I had extrapolated from the others were all there, each time modified for their performance under the peculiar physical circumstances in which the possum found itself, each time with individual quirks and mannerisms that were idiosyncrasies of the particular possum concerned. The laws still operated, and Snoopy was subject to those laws. I had tried, all along, to raise her to be as normal a possum as it was possible for her to be under the circumstances. But the circumstances were so extreme that I doubted that she could be classified as normal - I never relied on her behaviour alone in extrapolating possum generalities, taking it into account only when I saw the same in some other possum, which seemed to indicate that in this particular respect she conformed to the norm, and after the mishap when she lost part of her toe, when it became apparent that she would have to remain with me, I ceased to keep daily, diaristic notes on her behaviour, on the grounds that she would be too far

from the norm for her doings to be indicative in that respect.

If she was a happy individual, who was only in part a possum, that was all that really mattered. And she was happy: she certainly had her tribulations, but then so does every possum; if her lows were lower than average, then her highs were higher, for there were some moments when she seemed blissfully, ecstatically happy; for the most part, however, she was serene and content, as her attitudes and behaviour proclaimed not only to me, but to most of the other people who met her.

But now, when I would have been delighted to find that I had committed any enormity of psychological mutilation, provided that it was a way out, provided that it meant that Snoopy could, after all, have departed of her own accord and be living somewhere, safe and happy in a territory of her own, all I found said that it was not so. There is no such thing as a `normal' possum, any more than there is as `normal' human. Instead, there is a range which can be termed normal, each individual within it differing in some way from the mean. And Snoopy, her foibles despite, lay within that range. She was certainly an eccentric, and towards one end of the range, but nevertheless within it. It is ironic that I did not realise till afterwards how successful I had been. Just as I underestimated Joey's comparative intelligence, allowing for my own bias, so I had underestimated Snoopy's normality. The basics were intact. She was a possum as they were, adapted and adjusted to her particular circumstances, and she was no more likely to leave voluntarily than they, for the same reasons.

Wherever I looked I found possums. I could predict routes, and identify the groups of houses on them where the possums should be living. And once the presence of possums in a particular house was confirmed, I could locate the exits, and predict where a possum would appear, when, and where it would go from there. I remember startling at least one hitherto sceptical householder when a possum duly appeared, on cue, in the appointed place, and behaved according to the script. I think he thought I was a witch. Under other circumstances, it might have been worth a giggle. But without achieving the desired results, it was just a pointless exercise in expertise.

For it seemed at one stage as if I could locate every bloody possum in the district, except Snoopy!

And of course, there were bound to be the hostile receptions. Most people will help a distressed animal, regardless of whether they like that sort of animal or not; even more people will help a distressed human; some, with troubles of their own, will do it in the hope of a reward. But there are a few, a very, very few, who won't help to the extent of accepting a card with a phone number on it, literally for love or money. Man is the most intelligent animal we know, and as such has the highest percentage of individuals, and the highest percentage of wrong 'uns. By now I was in a densely populated area, meeting more and more people, so it was statistically certain that I would encounter them. They had to be there.

Yet there were so few, so incredibly few! I remember thinking at one time that I could count them on my fingers. From Eleanora to Newport, there were less than ten.

When I met such a one, I dealt with them as best I could, with no compunctions about emotional imperialism. But such encounters did nothing to relieve my wretchedness. And when, as invariably happened, I met with the reverse reception in the surrounding houses, I was all the more likely to burst into tears at the first sign of sympathy.

For incidents of the other sort stood out by reason of their extreme rarity. I know of no words to express the kindness of the people of the district, people from all walks of life, from nearly every country of

origin under the sun, people, some of them apparently in hardly better financial circumstances than I was, a few of them apparently near the other end of the economic scale, people who were highly respected and well-esteemed by their neighbours, others about whom I received dark warnings in advance, people who were articulate and fluent to an enviable degree, others who could manage only a few words of broken English, people who were happy, and for that reason tried to help others who were not, people who had sickness or trouble of their own or even bereavements in the family, whom I was appalled to have bothered once I learnt the circumstances, who still said, `I wish I could help more, but I can't right now. But please feel free to go anywhere on my property to look if you think there's a chance she's here' - because they themselves were distressed they felt for others who were distressed and wanted to help. Their kindness cut across any possible type of classification.

At the time, however, nothing seemed to help me much, and I didn't even have time for an embrocation of self-pity. But I did find four more sightings, of ever more recent date, in all of which the possum did something more than just appear, to make it sound like Snoopy.

In each case it was a matter of a possum who acted in the presence of some key object or objects as Snoopy would have done. In one case it was a possum who had walked into the living room, despite, or perhaps because of, the presence of two cats. For once the people had read my ad., but unfortunately tried to pick the possum up, with spectacular, and unpleasant, results. I'm afraid I could not guarantee that Snoopy would not object to being picked up by a stranger, particularly when I wasn't there - whenever anyone else made to touch her in my presence, she always used to look across at me, for reassurance that it was all right - any more than I could guarantee the behaviour of my cats under similar circumstances. So I went on to the next place, and there the sighting was accompanied, a few doors away, by the inevitable, unidentified, vanished body. By this time I had learned to take no notice of possible corpses which could neither be confirmed nor denied - I gave up counting when Snoopy had a total of eight separate bodies. I went on, and found another promising-sounding report. I was now about two weeks behind.

By this time I had a line of four sightings, five counting the one on the fringe of Ingleside, running down across Bayview, heading straight for Newport. In each case, the possum behaved as Snoopy would have in the presence of some key object. In each case the possum had done what Snoopy would predictably have done, gone, of necessity, to places where there were other possums, but avoided the particular houses which the others frequented, instead making itself conspicuous at houses where they did not go, in some cases where possums had never been seen before. And that, of course, meant that there were always other candidates for the role in the vicinity. In each case the date, so far as it could be established, was consistent with the time it would have taken Snoopy to reach there from Ingleside; the date of each sighting, so far as it could be established, was consistent with that of the preceding one - a possum could have travelled the distance between the two places in question in the interval between the sightings.

And I was sure then, and I am sure now, that if I could have covered every single house in Bayview, I could have constructed a similar line of sightings pointing to any place I chose to nominate.

I had no way of knowing whether it was one possum, the same in each case, or five different possums, pieces from five different jig-saw pictures which I had taken out of context and rammed together by procrustean methods, to form a new, different and completely fictional picture. I had

no way of knowing whether Snoopy was all of those five possums, or any one of them, or none of them. It was very likely indeed that the possum I appeared to be following was not a wraith but a phantom.

By this time I was in a position to take a rough guestimate at the total number of possums in the district, based on the distribution in the areas I had covered: something like 1200 to 2,000. So the odds could well be 1,999 to 1 against any given possum being Snoopy. Granted even that the behaviour of each of these possum suggested Snoopy; that really meant only that it was a house-possum of Snoopy's sort, like her kin at Newport. And even Jenny, the `wildest', most aloof of the bunch, had on occasions taken it into her head to march in through the door and explore the house. There would still be hundreds of those.

But even if the chances had been a million to one against, I still had to try to take that chance. For if I did not, there would be no chance at all . If those possums, or any one of them, were indeed Snoopy, then she was still wandering, still searching for her home, driven from group to group, unable to find a place to settle down, even a nest she could call her own sleep in. If I did not take that chance, then I was wilfully condemning her to this.

If you are cornered by a charging elephant, and all you have is a pea-shooter, then you use the pea-shooter, in the hope of scoring a supernaturally lucky hit, even though you know that, realistically, there is virtually no hope at all.

I remember saying something like this to someone at the time, fortunately someone who understood what I meant. It certainly didn't help salve my guilty conscience about bothering people - after all, Snoopy was supposed be exclusively my responsibility - that I was bothering them on such a wild chance, and in fact I felt constrained to give as realistic an assessment as possible to anyone who showed signs of asking. And it all took time, precious time.

Again I was completely amazed at how well people accepted my explanations of what I was trying to do, and why I was trying. I think that in the event those people would have forgiven the omission if I hadn't been so punctilious. They were that sort of people.

But the immediate problem was, where next? By now I was in an area where a possum would be able to work out that to get to the other side of the bay it was necessary to work round to the right, but there were still problems.

Firstly, the road running along the shore, Pittwater Road, in some places formed a formidable obstacle by any standards. But there was one place near enough to the line of sightings where there were resident possums, including one well-known tail-less local character, who apparently did the rounds of several houses each night, on the near side of the road. On the opposite side of the road was a spinney of casuarinas, then the shore of the bay itself, and the road at that point was comparatively narrow, and not overly well-lit. As I discovered, there were quiet periods during the evening, during which a possum might well be tempted to cross; indeed, it did not seem unlikely that the locals commuted.

From there it was possible to cross to the other side of the bay over an area of land recently reclaimed by dredging. It looked too open, and too long a run, for a possum to be tempted, but there were odd bits of cover, and after the place that Snoopy turned up in the first time she got lost, I was unwilling to rule it out on those grounds. So I stood off, and looked over at the other side, and tried to pick out the houses which would be most prominent at night, from the point of view of a possum, buildings for which a possum, contemplating a dash across open ground, might make.

Then I went round by motorcycle, and tried to relocate the houses I had selected, which proved to be by no means as easy as it appeared. The relationships, so clear from afar, were completely disguised by the new perspective from the adjacent roads. However, I think I covered most of them, and in one, to be sure, a possum had recently appeared. But it had done nothing to draw attention to itself, or otherwise indicate that it might be Snoopy, and, in retrospect, I think it likely that it was a migrating member of the next group further on. At the time, I decided to try for an alternative route across.

The alternative seemed to be for a possum to follow the far side of Pittwater Road, further around to the right, until it joins a smaller, quieter road behind Bayview golf links, then cross the road and go across the golf links themselves. This also coincided with the end of another, even more nebulous trail, with which I will not affront anyone's credulity, running across the hills further to the south.

Golf links are cruelly ambiguous affairs, from the point of view of possums. There are always copses of trees, and, I suspect, always possums living in them. But there are usually also sparser lines of trees, just that distance apart, the distance in which a dog will overtake a possum, tearing it apart at the foot of the next tree, in the very act of jumping for safety, yet close enough together to give the possum enough confidence to make the attempt. In this instance, however, there seemed to be a reasonable route.

There seemed no point in looking on the course itself during the day, so I went round the nearest houses. This however did bring results in the form of a phone call to say that there was a possum up a tree on the side of the course near Pittwater Road. I went straight away, and the children very kindly showed me where it was. It was not Snoopy, but it was very obviously a possum in the wrong place. I spent valuable time there, cursing, trying to make sure it didn't do anything too idiotic in its terror, at least until after dark, when the peak hour traffic itself was warning enough.

I have no way of knowing whether it was a possum in the act of migrating, or just a local who had stayed out too late and been trapped by the dawn, but at least it seemed to indicate that travel across the links was viable. I continued on round the nearby houses, guessing at routes and hearing of possums, none of which showed signs of being Snoopy, until I was once more back in the area I had seen from the other side of the bay.

While I had no immediate results, the following day I got a call from people who had been out when I visited their house, but were kind enough to ring in response to the note I had left. What they told me was enough to bring me over as fast as I could get there.

A week before a possum had walked in the door, gone into the lounge where they were, insisted on investigating the bedroom opening off the hall, then, apparently confused, gone and sat quietly in the hall for a while, before suddenly taking fright and scrambling very awkwardly up a jamb in the wall, getting stuck half way. The people, instinctively doing the right thing, had put a hand under its rump, and given it a boost up through a manhole into the roof. The general rule may be do not touch possums, but not one possum in a thousand would have turned in those circumstances. It was exactly right, exactly what the possum, any possum, wanted. Caught half way up a vertical surface when it was trying to flee, it was given support and assistance to get away.

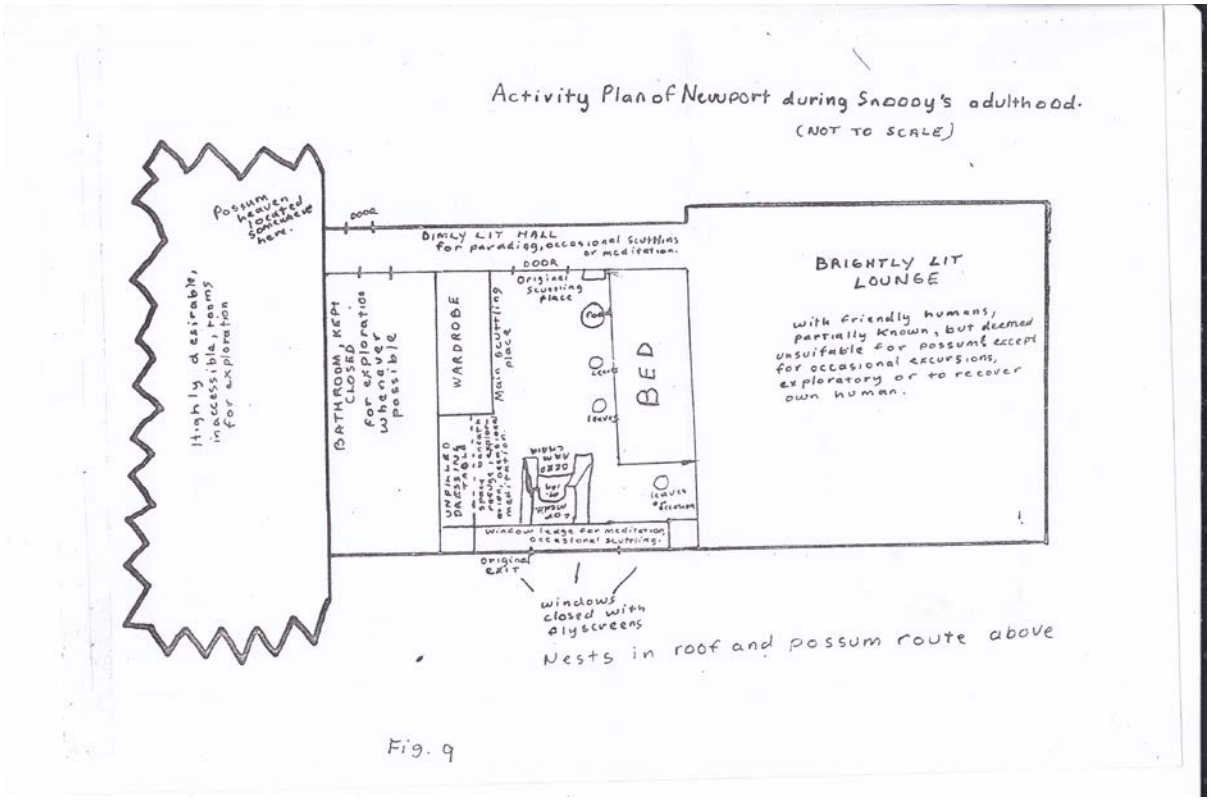


Fig. 9

The point was, that although the houses were nothing alike from a human point of view - they could hardly have been more disparate - the relationships, the all important relationships of key objects, were identical to those at Newport. The house itself was in the same general relationship to Pittwater. As I guessed from the appearance of the place, and what I had learned of the house groups in the vicinity, and confirmed by observation that evening, there was a possum route over the roof. More importantly, the internal relationship of the rooms, the door, the hall, the lounge room, the bedroom, with rooms not normally used by the possum further down the hall from the bedroom, was identical (see Plan, fig.). And the possum did exactly what Snoopy normally did in those places in her Newport routine.

If the possum were Snoopy, what happened was this. She came in the door, finding the hall at right angles, as expected, then proceeded down to the lounge, where the people were, and where I was likely to be at that time of night, to tell me she was home. The lounge was where it was supposed to be, but I wasn't there. The people were unfamiliar, but friendly - well, that was not too different from Newport, and she'd been a long time away - so, unable to find me, she asked to be let into the bedroom, as she had done under similar circumstances at Newport. No doubt she expected to find me there, or at least her bed, her food, her chair and her scuttling place. As at Newport, she was duly let in, and headed straight for the bed. But it was all wrong, so she retreated to the hall and meditated, thinking it over. Eventually she realised that she was once again in the wrong place, panicked, and tried to escape up the wall, typically getting stuck half way up when her still slightly weak back legs failed to provide the locomotive power for such a straight, smooth climb. When she got the assistance she needed she went up into the roof, and subsequently resumed her search.

I can't say how grateful I am to those people. Whoever it was, it was a possum looking for a particular place - that it didn't come back,

despite the friendly reception and offer of food shows that - and it was received with the utmost kindness, and its' inevitable disappointment eased as much as possible. And if it was Snoopy, then at least, for a brief while, she finally thought that she was home, before the truth was forced upon her. Some people don't need books, or instructions - they just automatically know what to do.

But it had all happened a week before, and the possum hadn't come back. I stayed there that night, and though there were possums around, both on the premises and in the surrounding area, there was no one resembling Snoopy, or with any desire to make my closer acquaintance.

On the following day I went round the nearby houses again, covering those I'd skipped, to no avail. All that happened was that I found an alternative candidate for the possum who explored the house. He was a juvenile male, who had been picked up off the ground as a baby, with what sounded like identical problems to Snoopy's, and hand-reared in partial isolation. Unlike Snoopy, however, he hadn't made a good physical recovery - to judge from report, he remained in the same state that she had been in as a youngster, able to make a show of climbing, but clumsily, unreliably, and effectively not very well. He had recently disappeared. There was no way to be sure which it was - the people, needless to say, had not seen my ads, and, naturally, had been more concerned with parts of possum other than hind feet. The degree of disability could not be gauged from the place where the possum stuck - it just so happens that this is the most difficult sort of climb of all, and any slight degree of impediment would be enough to halt a possum midway. Indeed any possum, other than the most agile juvenile, would have difficulty with that sort of scramble, and I've seen other, perfectly fit possums, without any specific physical defect, merely not by nature unusually nimble, get stuck in similar situations.

There wasn't much I could do, in the circumstances, to help the little male, but I collected reports and passed on the information where it seemed relevant, as I went. By the sound of it, he, a juvenile male bound to travel once he matured, yet even more physically unfit than Snoopy, had even less business wandering alone.

All I could do, from my own point of view, was to go on in the same old way. The road, with obvious possum routes and territories, curved away to the right, but I still had a week to try to make up, so once again I had to rely on Snoopy's taking the most direct route, where one existed, along the shore of the bay. So I enquired at the next houses on this shore route, skipped ahead, trying to make up time, enquired again, then worked back.

And in working back I found the inevitable body. By the time I got there, all that was left was tufts of hair, long, luxurious grey hair, like Snoopy's just before she left. The possum had been killed by dogs after a storm blew down a tree that formed part of the normal above-ground route - which seems, at least, to point to a possum who had been there long enough for the routes to become automatic.

Where the body went, no one, of course, knew. Probably the dogs reclaimed it. The lady who lived on the property was very kind, and as helpful as she could be. She was by no means a possum freak, but observant and struck me as being particularly reliable. Once she knew I was looking for a mature female, it was she, as I remember, who told me without any prompting that she didn't think this was a mature female, because it was a small possum, and females are generally larger than males. However, that was hardly conclusive; for all I knew the general size of the possums she knew may have been greater than those I knew, so a strange female, though larger than the general run of males of her own kin, might still have been

smaller than the females she knew. The possum was killed, as far as we could work out, probably the night after the possum left the house further back - and could easily have covered the distance in that time.

Later I heard that the juvenile male had been seen not far from where he disappeared, a few days after this a possum was found dead.

There was nothing I could do about it, in any case, so I went on again, skipping ahead, covering a group of houses across the hypothetical route, then working back a little, This time, because of the topography, I was able to put a line across the neck of the peninsula, from the main road to the bay.

I was now in Newport, and probably no more than a mile from my parents' house, as a possum would travel. When I started, I was three months behind; at the end, I was a week behind. But the trail, if it was a trail, ended there.

I simply do not know what happened to Snoopy.

It is unlikely that it was anything good. Possums of her sort do not `revert to nature'. She had nothing to revert to except a possum who lived in a roof. They do, however, grow up and declare independence, and circumstances, certainly, had meant that Snoopy for a long time remained in a kind of frozen adolescence. But the signs were all wrong. The female separation pattern is typically gradual, and marked by aggression towards the mother. To put it bluntly, Snoopy should have bitten me, not kissed me good-bye.

By the same token, her behaviour certainly fits the male departure pattern, and Snoopy, because of her disabilities, had been forced in some sense to act out the role of a juvenile male. The moping - pre-mating season blues in both cases, rather than any premonition of departure - the moodiness, the refusal to go outside, the increased affection towards me, the suddenness of the disappearance, were all characteristics of Joey's behaviour as well as Snoopy's. But that, I think, is a cop out. Snoopy, a great-grandmother and very much a female, could hardly have pulled a sex-change at this late stage. And for almost a year she had been effectively looking after herself. Though she retained some infantile characteristics, I have known other, totally independent, mature house-possums to do the same, when they can afford the luxury. She was too mature, too settled in her ways, and too independent, to declare independence.

But even if she did, it does not alter the prognosis. It is difficult to see how a possum who a few days before could not hold her established territory against a neighbour without my assistance could win a new one from a hostile and established stranger.

Furthermore, if she did go of her own accord and survived, she would almost certainly have come back in time. Not because she loved me. She did love me, in every way that it is possible for a possum to love, and few ways she invented for herself. Nevertheless, she was a possum, a female possum, and therefore the bonds with individuals could be broken. The stronger bond was with her territory. She would have come back, not to me, but to her house, to her bed-nest.

If, against all odds, she did declare independence, then I would be the mother she sought to be independent from, so she would not come back until enough time had elapsed for there to be no question of my being her mother, probably about six months, when she herself had a baby of her own in her pouch. She was not back when I last checked, nearly a year after she disappeared.

I find it very difficult to write about Snoopy: I knew her for too long, and too well. It is much easier to sketch a pen-portrait of the others, whom I knew more superficially. But Snoopy I knew as a pathetically

weak baby, a mischievous, vivacious, if physically limited youngster, as a proud young mother, and as a steady, fussy, but basically serene possum in early middle age. I know that she was gentle and affectionate beyond her kind. And I know that in one respect, she was virtually unique. In her alone, because of the peculiar circumstances and sequence of events, the mature non-possum bond was based upon the bond between mother and baby. That's something that normally just can't happen.

PART III

EPILOGUE: MIRI AND THE NEWPORT POSSUMS

1. Miri, the Possum Chauvinist.

After that, there was nothing which might be considered as a lead. I continued to answer calls, and follow up reports, and, for lack of anything more constructive to do, worked on the first part of this. Spring came, and with it the next mating season. I renewed the advertisements, but with no success. It proved, in any case, to be les virulent than usual; perhaps the midwinter upheaval had left everyone too exhausted for energetic proceedings.

I kept hoping that Snoopy would turn up at the house. It is true that young females who leave home tend to bring their babies back- not, in all probability, from any sublime homing instinct, but simply because very good nests, especially of a type suitable for rearing babies, are very limited in number, so that the most suitable nest the new mothers can find is likely to be one she knew, probably already discovered by her own mother under similar circumstances. This would certainly have been true in Snoopy's case, so if, by some chance, her departure had been a delayed independence reflex, and she had survived, there was a good chance of her returning to the house - or failing that, installing herself in one of the neighbouring houses. But she didn't.

At Newport, Honey had Buster (later Busta, when `he' turned out to be a she). Busta was almost doomed to *de facto* gemination: as I said, people kept trying to give me possums, and in midwinter I had been saddled with a very young baby who survived its mother's death in a road accident. It was healthy, but much too small and embryonic to survive out of the pouch, so I tried to impose it on Honeybunch, the strongest and healthiest pregnant female within my physical reach, but she `wasn't having any' - she shook it off, violently, when it tried to cling to her - and the baby inevitably died. Jenny, for the second season in succession, had no live offspring - she hadn't produced a baby since her pouch was damaged a couple of years before, when she tried to raise `twins'. Jenny was unusually prolific[xxxiii] In her prime her attitude to other people's babies was exactly that of the other females - if they approached her in error they should be driven away, more gently than an adult possum, and with restraint, but nevertheless thoroughly disabused of their delusions. However, after she'd had seven babies in half as many years, two of which were raised by, or in conjunction with, me, she became somewhat confused as to which of the many babies present in the group was hers. While the others continued to repel strange babies who wandered up to them by accident or instinct, Jenny became prone to treat any baby which came to her and asked to share her food as if it were her own - apparently, she couldn't be sure that it wasn't. Pumpkin, one of her daughters, was in the process of a milder mother-daughter separation pattern: she had moved to a nearby nest, in another part of the roof, and produced her own first baby. In the manner of young mothers, she mislaid it somewhere in the roof - we heard it crying, but assumed she'd find it eventually. She never in fact did recover it, but Jenny appeared next day with a grossly distended pouch, and remained in that state for several days. Since she had already had her own well developed baby on her back for short periods in the preceding few days, we couldn't work out what was going on. Eventually her own baby reappeared on her back, and there was still one in her pouch. She proceeded to raise both babies, her own, the male Dinky, and the smaller female, Di, short for Dido. There was nothing

in their behaviour to suggest that a brother-sister relationship was normal, or even thinkable, in possum terms. Each, independently, related to Jenny as it would to its other. They sat on either side of her on a branch, each independently begging and receiving, or being allowed to steal, some of her food. Jenny raised both to maturity, but it proved a very severe strain on her. It pushed her over the line from being a possum in late middle age to an old possum.

While Jenny had no live offspring in spring 1975, a look-alike, `Pumpkin', produced a truly phenomenal baby who was at first dubbed Jenny Junior: there was a temporary identity crisis, as I will explain later. But even before that was sorted out, it became apparent that `she' was a he, and the young behemoth was re-named Elephant. Dido, the female half of Jenny's `twins', produced Grub, a very likely lad, and Sherry distinguished herself with a young lady by the name of Spitfire. One occasionally says, of a certain type of small human male, when circumstances constrain one to be polite, `My, but he's a real little boy, isn't he?' Well, given that possums are backwards, Spitfire was in that sense `a real little girl'. And she `practised' for being a big girl on her contemporaries, and even on astonished adults, until she lost the protection of babyhood. Battered Baby had lost her own first baby while it was still in the pouch, which was probably all to the good.

Early in September I got a phone call from a very kind man whom I had met in my travels. He had an orphaned baby bushy-tail that some people he knew had found. Neither they nor he were in a position to adopt it, could I do something about it. He said it was black.

I said, `Bushy-tails don't come in black,' and was he sure it wasn't some other sort of possum - a glider, perhaps? I'd last seen a glider at Newport only a few years before.

I should have known better than to say, `possums don't'.

I didn't want to take the baby myself. The thought of Another Possum in Snoopy's house was as repugnant to me as it would have been to her. But under the circumstances I thought I'd better go and have a look at it - I've had more experience than most people with young baby possums, so I might be able to offer something constructive in the way of advice about its immediate treatment - and perhaps we could work out what to do about it in the long term. Apart from which, I was intrigued by the idea of a black bushy-tail.

In fact the baby was in very good condition, and all its immediate needs well attended to. And it was, indeed, so dark a grey as to be to all intents and purposes black, with white back feet. It was only later that it started to develop the gingery baby colouration.[xxxiv]

And, heaven help us, a female. She was, with the exception of Snoopy, the ugliest baby possum I have ever seen. She was in the long skinny rat stage which precedes emergence from the pouch, and she was all out of proportion, Snoopy but more so. Her ears were even longer, and she looked even more like a little donkey gone wrong.

But she was perfectly healthy, and the problem was what to do with her. She came, as it happened, from Newport, but the opposite end from where we lived - and her appearance re-awakened speculation about Mephistopheles' home group. But she couldn't go back there. Whether she was a genuine orphan, or just a baby ineptly parked by a young mother, it was out of the question. The people there were not well at the time, and certainly in no condition to spend the next couple of nights trying to find her mother, meanwhile coping with the needs of the baby. In any case, by this time she had passed through too many hands and been in too many strange-smelling places. The mother might indeed have rejected her.

That left a rather limited choice of alternatives, mainly a zoo.

I have very mixed feelings about possums and zoos. In some cases it is indeed the only option, and I've heard of one case which sounded as if it was not only the only viable alternative to death, but also the happiest outcome from the possum's point of view. Some neighbours of ours at Ingleside had found a totally blind possum wandering helplessly in the daytime, and had taken it to a private zoo. It seemed thoroughly pleased with the situation, and proved a great success, since, being blind, it was quite amenable to reversing night and day, so that people who had never seen a possum before could make its acquaintance.

It sounds like the right individual finding the right alternative at the right time. From what I've seen, the commonest cause of blindness in possums is something which resembles cataracts, and they usually develop in mature, if not aged animals. Mature possums, even females, tend to develop a phlegmatic attitude to life, which, for them, is rough indeed - they take things as they come. In addition there are some possums, usually males but some females too, who obviously enjoy friendly human attentions - the odd one even seems to like physical contact. They are exhibitionists, only too delighted to perform for an admiring audience - and preferably, a gastronomic fee.

If this was such a possum, then it was given all it would have asked for, if it could have spoken. It was blind, wandering terrified in a strange place, unable to find food or protect itself, and aware of its own vulnerability. It had been given a small, secure territory which it could get to know by scent and touch, a guaranteed food supply, and lots of admiring attention. I hope, though it is speculation, that it was something like old Erik. Oh (sigh, snuggle) yes, very satisfactory.

But this baby was an entirely different case. In zoos, as a matter of practical necessity, possums, plural, have to be confined in an area hardly adequate for even one female, albeit a suburbanite used to tailoring her territorial ambitions to the exigencies of what, for a possum, is high-density living. In addition, the baby was too young to survive without a mother - or a humidicrib. She would have to be hand-reared first, then integrated into a group who, it might be supposed, already had their territorial sensibilities in a perpetual state of outrage. And a human mother, however good, is at best a poor substitute.

It didn't seem right for a healthy baby, if there was any other alternative. Particularly if that alternative included a possum mother.

In short, I proposed to give her to Bindi.

The possums at Ingleside, Snoopy's descendants, had become progressively `wilder', in the sense of having less to do with me. Bindi was a thoroughly independent, self-sufficient soul, and had demonstrated, by absenting herself for weeks at a time, that any food she got from me was in the nature of a treat, not a necessity.

I had no wish to alter that situation. I wasn't always going to be at Ingleside forever, and I didn't want to create a situation where there might be a problem of what to do about Bindi.

If I were going to foist an extra baby on to her, then she would need some assistance from me. And I would have to woo her, in order to persuade her to accept that assistance. But Bindi had always seemed a stable, emotionally resilient character, once she was through her nervous adolescence, a possum who took things as they came or didn't come, sometimes turning up at the house for a handout, every night, as regular as clockwork, then staying away for a couple of weeks, and then, apparently, resuming the particular route which brought her to the house. It didn't seem likely that any lasting harm would be done.

And she seemed ideally suited for the job. She was young and robust, in her prime, but with the experience of a previous baby behind her. Her own new baby, a boy, was just at the stage where he was out of the pouch for some of the time, back in at others, the same age as Jenny's Dinky had been when she adopted Di, old enough to survive permanently outside, riding on her back, while the new, younger baby, occupied the pouch.

The little female was so ugly, and so like Snoopy, that I was determined not to make the same mistake again, and saddle an ugly duckling, who grew up to be a swan, with an odd name. So, as an act of faith, I called her by the prettiest name I could think of on the spur of the moment, Miri. But this meant that alliteration was irresistible in the case of her unnamed `twin'-to-be. He forthwith became Meggs - he was ginger enough at the time, with his baby colouring, and, if he survived to maturity, would once more start to turn a gingery red.

So I took Miri home with me. I was sleeping in the lounge room at the time, on a banana chair - I had two attempts at sleeping in the bed in the bedroom, and that was enough. I didn't think the temporary presence of a baby, albeit a female one, in the lounge room until I could fob her off on to Bindi, would seriously affect what slight remaining chance there might be of Snoopy's returning.

I took her out to examine her more closely for injuries, and she woke up, and started to cry. Mummy! Where was her mummy? She refused to be consoled - she was sure I was very nice, but she wanted her mummy, and I wasn't her mummy. But she was very young, and she soon cried herself to sleep, only to wake up again at intervals, calling for her mummy and trying to go off to look for her, until she once more exhausted herself and fell asleep.

She must have been separated from her mother for some considerable time, for her fur was unkempt and she was alive with grass-ticks - uncomfortable, but not dangerous. I decided that I'd better bath her, very carefully, washing and drying a very small part at a time, in front of the radiator, so that she was never more damp than when her own mother washed her, and didn't catch cold. As far as giving her to Bindi was concerned, the less she smelt of Another Possum, and the more she smelt exclusively of the house and me, the better. And while I was at her, I'd better try the trick of rubbing her tummy with warm damp cotton wool, to produce a motion, since I didn't know how long it had been since her mother had cleaned her bowels out, and I couldn't be sure that Bindi mightn't decide to miss a night, and not turn up.

Both worked as far as that went, but nevertheless, it was a mistake. For Miri woke up, thoroughly. This time she wasn't so sure that I was all very nice. I was doing things that only her mummy should do, and her mummy was a possum, so I wasn't her mummy, so I was a baby-thief who took baby possums away from their mummies, and she wanted her Mummy! and I wouldn't let her have her mummy - Mummy! and I wouldn't leave her alone so she <u>bit</u> me, as hard as her baby jaws could manage.

Quite right, too. The only thing a baby can do if taken by a predator at that age. But she became more and more sure that I wasn't nice at all with every passing minute, struggling away from me, racing frantically around the room trying to climb the walls, and all the time calling for Mumm-eee! When I caught her and took her back to bed, trying to sooth her by putting her under the bedclothes, all I got was, CHOMP.

Sheba, in pursuit of her perennial obsession - attend to <u>me</u>! - had insinuated herself on to the end of the banana chair. Sheba, it will be remembered, was the cat who hated all kittens as rivals, cuffing them and abusing them whenever they came within reach. She was also the cat who had

difficulty in associating cause with effect, with the result that the best I could do was get one thing, and one thing only, into her head: all possums, whatever size or shape, were sacrosanct. That one thing stuck. She avoided them rather than risk strife, knowing that she would get the blame if anything went wrong.

Miri looked at her, doubtfully at first, then with increasing hope. That was more the right size. Could it possibly be - was it - MUMMY!

Sheba stared at her, aghast. Then as Miri toddled towards her with ever-increasing confidence, she leapt to her feet, and ran. No human male, hailed as `Daddy' by a totally strange child, could have fled with more alacrity.

At that stage I was rather peeved with Sheba. I know she couldn't help it, but her behaviour at the time of Snoopy's disappearance had been in such sharp contrast to that of her brother that it hardly endeared her to me. He was never a cat particularly given to smoodging, but when I was right down in the depths of despair, sitting on the edge of the banana chair with my head in my hands, he just came and quietly sat beside me, something he very, very rarely did normally. But tomcat business called him the next day, and he departed on one of his three-day excursions. I didn't blame him, any more than I blamed the possums. I remember saying at the time that I would have stayed well away from me too, if I could have.

But Sheba didn't even seem to know that anything was wrong. All she was concerned with was the fact that my mother was staying with me for a few days. At first timid as always, she then decided that this was wonderful- an extra lap to jump on, an extra chest in an extra bed to sit on and stifle when the opportunity arose. And when Smiley disappeared too, she thought all her Christmases had come - two humans to attend to her, and the house all to herself! She danced from one end of the house to the other, jubilating.

But I think I forgave her then. If I lived to be a hundred I could not have devised a more condign revenge than to have her hailed as mummy by a possum kitten.

It wasn't so funny for Miri, however. She was bitterly disappointed. And she continued to cry, and beg me to give her back to her mummy, and bite me whenever I tried to comfort her. I agreed with her, mummy was a possum and she should be back with her, but that didn't stop the bites from hurting. She bawled and squealed and protested, and nothing I could do seemed to help. Eventually, she fell asleep again.

Fortunately, `Mummy' was punctual, and arrived soon after. As usual, she came in with Meggs on her back, and sat at the window, eating out of her dish. I had found that Meggs, like most other babies, tried to snatch food out of his mother's hands, and, when she let him have it, dropped it because he was too small to handle pieces of normal size. So I had got into the habit of cutting up the food into very small pieces, and he, as was becoming his custom, got off Bindi's back and sat on the other side of the dish, taking his share.

I produced Miri from under my sweater, and offered her to Bindi.

Bindi was absolutely horrified at the sight of a baby possum in the charge of a human. Such a thing had never happened at the house during her lifetime. She reacted as Joey and Snoopy did to role reversals. It was something that was <u>wrong</u>, and terrifying. She turned, and fled out the window.

Miri woke up just in time to see her Mummy's departing rump. She let out one despairing wail of Mumm-ee! Bindi came back as if she were on elastic. I held Miri out to her, Miri scrambled on board, dived into Bindi's pouch, and that was the last I saw of her, save only for the odd leg

or ear or other disembodied portion of anatomy protruding from Bindi's middle, for the next two weeks.

She was that young.

Bindi once more departed, at the gallop, anxious to get her baby out of reach of the terrible baby-thief.

Poor little Meggs was absolutely stricken. One minute he was the sole apple of his mother's eye, with a warm pouch to dive back into whenever the world was too much for him, the next minute he was out in the cold, with the pouch full of a repugnant-smelling interloper, and his mother was going off and leaving him! He took off after her wildly.

I must confess I'd rather overlooked his interests in my Machiavellian schemes.

I raced round the house and arrived in time to see him take a desperate leap on to Bindi's back. She staggered under the weight, but battled on across the roof, heading for her upstream nest. I tried to escort her to make sure she got home safely, but that only made her more nervous, so I let her go.

She came back every night for the next two weeks, Miri in her pouch, Meggs on her back or trailing behind. Try as I might, I was never allowed to see them safely home afterwards, being permitted to accompany them at most as far as the drive.

Then one night Bindi turned up with the dearest, shyest, sweetest little baby imaginable on her back. I put one finger out for the little one to sniff, by way of introduction.

Most people will have known instances of shy, engaging small children, clinging to their mothers, their heads coyly against their skirts, accidently overheard among other children a few minutes later, miraculously changed into aggressive, domineering individuals, overbearing the others. What a child is in the presence of its parents, overawed by other adults, may bear no relationship to what the same child is like among its peer group.

A similar transformation now took place in front of my eyes.

The dear little baby suddenly turned into the miniature fury that had almost wrecked my lounge room. She laid back her ears, bared her teeth, and sneered at me.

She could afford to sneer now. She'd found her big strong hairy mother and could tell me what she thought of me with impunity.

I couldn't help sympathizing with her, and rejoicing in her vindictive triumph. She was a singularly ill-used baby possum.

But troubles were looming. While the babies, when Bindi brought them to the window for dinner, had no real interaction with each other, each relating individually to its mother, like Jenny's `twins', I got the impression from Miri's flinching and so forth that there might be sibling friction in the nest. Under the circumstances, I could hardly blame Meggs.

Jenny had apparently kept her `twins' under control, but she had a commonsense, matter-of-fact approach to querulous babies, born of years of experience. Like her look-alike `Pumpkin', if a brat protested, for example about being washed, she scooped it over on its back with one front paw, planted one huge hairy hand firmly in the middle of its chest to hold it down, and blithely went on with the job, ignoring the squawks and squalling. Bindi was younger, and more prone to get worried and over-solicitous about babies, taking them a bit too seriously.

Matters were also getting very difficult physically. Miri was still in the stage where she automatically followed a larger departing possum, and sometimes tried to get on Meggs' back. And Meggs still jumped on Bindi's back in a crisis. A triple-decker was just too unstable for

Bindi to manage through the trees.

Then Miri started making her first baby expeditions a few feet away from her mother, Meggs being now at the stage where his might take him as far as the next tree. One night down the creek I encountered Bindi, alone and glaring. I looked for the babies, worried, and finally spotted Meggs a couple of trees away.

Bindi became frantic. She was up to her old trick again, drawing the attention of a supposed predator, me. It emerged that she had been protecting Miri, up the top of her tree, and didn't know what to do when I spotted Meggs a short distance away. There was no harm done, since I wasn't a real predator, but the potential of the situation alarmed me. It was evident that she couldn't protect both, or cope with both, and the situation was putting all three at risk.

I tried to kidnap Meggs, since it was evident that Miri was not to be parted from Bindi. Naturally he took off out the window as soon as I made the first move and he became aware of the danger of being cut off.

Then, finally, the real predator arrived for a replay of the creek incident. One of the local dogs, of doubtful character, got loose and came pounding down on us. The three possums fled in three different directions. Neither of the babies, above all Miri, who still fitted into one of my hands, was old enough to cope with that. I searched frantically, but found nothing. Bindi came back to the house alone, obviously looking for them without success.

I thought that in trying to do the best for Miri, I'd managed to get both babies killed. I was on the phone bawling to my father, when about five inches of possum appeared on the window behind me.

It was a veritable odyssey for her, lasting more than an hour, of struggling through a world too big for her to get from where I'd last seen her to the window. She'd done the second most sensible thing - instead of going back to the nest and waiting, she came to the window where she'd found her `Mummy' the last time she lost her.

Bindi apparently found Meggs, and Miri found herself. I'd been unable to help in any way - I couldn't find anyone.

I never saw Meggs at the house again after the time I tried to kidnap him - either Bindi was careful to keep him out of my sight, or he hid from me of his own accord. But I was sure he was still around after the dog incident, coming for food with Bindi while I was out of the house.

Baby possums are very prone to evanescent food fads, and, like adults, also have idiosyncratic ways of eating their portions of things such as bread and apple. With bread, some eat the middle out of it and leave the surrounding crust; others start methodically from one corner and work systematically back and forth, right to left, left to right, right to left, as if weaving, always maintaining a straight edge, gradually reducing the original square of bread to a rectangle, three quarters, then half, then a quarter of the square with which they began; still others attack the slice in a totally haphazard manner, nibbling first here, then there, without any apparent pattern. With apple it is a matter of starting from one end, biting the point of the orange-shaped segment off and working down from there, or starting in the middle, or of holding segment by the skin and working methodically backwards and forwards, as with the bread, until the skin itself is reached. Some consider this the best part, others leave it uneaten. The upshot of all this is that when a possum doesn't finish a given portion, what it leaves behind follows a fairly distinctive configuration.

Meggs was on an apple kick when I last saw him. He always left the skin, and usually a little piece of flesh, the shape and position of

which was dictated by his own method of approach. At that stage, anyway, Bindi wasn't particularly interested in apple, and when she did have some it was one of the tiny pieces I'd cut for the babies, which she took as one mouthful, leaving no trace behind; Meggs, for whom the tiny segment was a giant serving, like a quarter of a watermelon in proportion to his size, always left his own distinctive remainders. Whenever food was taken while I was absent, I found tiny triangular pieces of apple-skin, with little bits of apple adhering to them in the manner that was Meggs' signature, when I returned. Since, to my knowledge, the only other baby in the vicinity was Miri, who at that stage was with me, there didn't seem to be much doubt.[bb]

Nevertheless I was relieved when I ran into Bindi in the bush one night, and saw a lively, bread-hungry youngster nearby. I couldn't swear that it was Meggs from the appearance - he would have been in the stage where possums grow dramatically, in spurts, and change drastically in a matter of a few days - but I can't see who else it would have been.

But Bindi returned to the house later on the night of the dog incident, alone, and collected Miri. She took her up into the roof, and left her there. Apparently she had decided to keep one baby in the tree, the other in the roof-nest over the laundry, and alternate between the two.

Miri alone, reluctant and biting, came into my possession a couple of times soon after that; Bindi would come and collect her from my protective custody, take her up into the roof and park her. It was on one of these occasions that I first actually saw the parking order given.

Miri was pathetically determined to be a good baby. Like Joey, having lost her mummy twice, and found her again, she was absolutely dedicated to doing nothing that would upset the relationship. As it were, to sin no more lest such a punishment descend upon her again. For the first few times she dutifully stayed put - she was in any case in the phase where babies sleep a lot, for most of the time for several consecutive days, before emerging into the next growth phase.

But she grew restive at times, and then I'd go out and give her something to eat, slipping it under the edge of the roof. Provided I didn't try to touch her, she was amenable to that. It was almost as if, in the past hundred years, the typical suburbanite relationship to humans had somehow become innate. This type of relationship, respectful proffering of food, was, according to Miri, `right'; anything more intimate, like regarding me as her mother, was `wrong'.

But Miri out of sight apparently tended to be Miri out of mind. Or perhaps Meggs wasn't behaving so impeccably when he received similar orders in the tree-nest. In any case, Bindi parked Miri one night and didn't come back. Everything was all right the first night. But the second night Miri was obviously about to take off. I could neither order nor cajole her, but I could utilize her aversion to me and her fear that I might try to kidnap her, to keep her in until daylight. It was quite clear that she was going to take off at dusk on the third night.

There happened to be an archaeology lecture I particularly wanted to attend that night, the finale to a project, with the beginning of which I'd been involved, years before. I had a choice of staying put and trying to keep Miri until Bindi arrived - if she did, something I was beginning to doubt -, leaving Miri to her own devices, or catching her by force and taking her with me.

I thought of the soothing, soporific effect the bike had on

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bb. Bush-rats, though the same size as baby possums, have an entirely different shaped bite to a possum, sharp where a possum's bite leaves a round hole.

Snoopy, and decided to chance it. I managed to snatch Miri in an unguarded moment. She struggled and bit at first, but I put her in the old mohair baby possum sleeping bag I'd made for Joey. I suspended it under my jumper, wearing a loose coat on top to hide the bulge, and took off as soon as possible. As I'd hoped, the pendant, pouch-like motion of the bag put her to sleep - she was still very young, and would probably still have spent part of the night in her mother's pouch, had everything been normal. She slept untroubled through the twenty mile trip.

So she was probably the first possum to attend an archaeology lecture. She slept through that, too - no reflection on the lecturer, she was, after all, a little young to have matriculated. But she woke up as I was getting back on the bike.

She couldn't have picked a worse moment. She could hardly have found a stranger place from the point of view of sight, smell and sound. I took off in a hurry, and the motion kept her from trying to escape, but she remained agitated. She started to relax a bit only when we got to the bushy part of Mona Vale Road - on a bike you are much closer to the surroundings than in an enclosed vehicle, and even I had got to know the smell and feel of the places along the route. She would have realised that she was in a more suitable sort of area, at least.

When we got back Bindi showed up, somewhat put out. She must have known that I visited Miri in the roof, if only from leftover food and the smell of it on Miri's breath. But apparently, while I was supposed to keep a maternal eye on Miri, I wasn't supposed to take her away. Bindi was alarmed, and somewhat indignant. She took Miri on her back and departed in haste.

But she brought her back to the window a little later. Apparently she had discovered anew that she didn't know what to do with her. I took her from Bindi, very slowly and deliberately, making sure Bindi could see what I was doing. Bindi ate a little, then departed. And this time the baby's piping didn't bring her back.

I took Miri outside to make sure I wasn't misinterpreting, but Bindi went off across the roof. She wouldn't come to Miri's call.

It was quite clear what Bindi meant.

I decided to try to make a clean break, and took Miri to Newport for three days, keeping her in my room. But even then, when we came back, Bindi still acted as Miri's mother in her presence. She took her off on her back once more, but brought her back to the roof and left her there.

Bindi continued for some time to preserve this ambivalent attitude. She never chastised Miri, as she would a strange, or even known local baby. If she wasn't quite her baby, she wasn't Somebody Else's Baby, either.

Unfortunately, that accurately described Miri's position. She had insisted from the beginning that I couldn't be her mother, because her mother was a possum, and by now she was too firmly imprinted on to Bindi to change.

After we returned to Ingleside, I tried taking her out on my shoulder. We got only as far as the nearest tree. She went up it, evaded me coming down, and took off through the undergrowth, heading straight for the spot downstream, on the other side of the creek, where Bindi was usually to be found at that time of night. She probably smelt her.

I had hoped not to have to control Miri by force, to follow at a respectful distance, making it clear that I was accompanying her, not chasing her. The more frequently I caught her, or shut her in, the less likely she was to trust me. Because she wasn't imprinted on to me, and wouldn't obey me, I had already had to do all the things that were

absolutely taboo with the other babies, catch her, confine her, trick her by luring her with food and soothing tones, then grab her or slam the window, to keep her out of danger. The longer it went on, the less trusting she would be and the worse it would get. Even Snoopy wouldn't have stayed with me a week, regardless of her disabilities, if I'd treated her like that. And I didn't want to do it any more.

But Miri was already in flight, like a little boomerang, straight back to the `Mummy' who couldn't cope with her. And she was simply too small to be out alone. Owls, cats, dogs, even reptiles would find her a toothsome morsel. I took off after her to catch her.

But she was in what I call the `grasshopper' stage. Baby possums, with very light frames, weighing almost nothing, can jump almost vertically, upward of five times their own length. Adult possums can't do that - they can jump horizontally, or on an angle, but their weight in proportion to their muscular capability does not allow them to shoot up vertically like that. It must be an inbuilt safeguard, precisely to help babies of this age evade capture.

A thinking grasshopper, already old enough to take evasive action specifically aimed at losing me, utilizing the cover and physical surroundings, proved uncatchable. But I could follow her through the undergrowth by ear, getting further behind all the time.

Directly between her and her goal was not only the creek, but a small dam, ten to fifteen feet in diameter. Not having had, to my knowledge, experience of such things, she made a beeline for it. I expected it would stop her, and hoped I'd be able to catch her while she tried to puzzle out a way round.

Then I heard the splash, and the baby cries of alarm, as she went straight in.

`Good,' I thought. The edge of the dam, where she went in, was only an inch or so deep, and had a dense growth of weeds which would support her. She wouldn't drown in the few seconds if took me to get there. And I knew from my experiences with Kylie that possums swim very slowly. In fact, getting a possum into water was the only way I knew of moving faster than it could over a short distance, catching up, or distancing it in Kylie's case. I didn't want Miri to have the frightening experience of a ducking, but, under the circumstances, it didn't seem an unmitigated disaster.

But when I reached the dam I couldn't find her. Then I saw her out in the water, not quite half way across, fairly streaking through the water, with a V-shaped bow-wave, like a little otter.

I just stood and goggled. But she was heading straight as an arrow, for the other side. After a moment's hesitation, I decided that if she could, I could. And I'd better. I'd seen goannas swimming in there. From the point of view of a baby possum only a few inches long there were <u>alligators</u> in that dam.

So I waded after her. But she was outdistancing me. To overhaul her I had to swim myself. And I still wouldn't have caught her if my own wash hadn't swamped her as she was trying to scramble up the opposite bank.

Adult possums can't swim like that. It is a dogged, water-logged affair. This must be another inbuilt protection, like the `grasshopper' phase, to safeguard babies at this vulnerable stage.

But inbuilt protections or no, minute creatures with a predilection for trekking through impenetrable eighteen-inch high jungle, and swimming alligator-infested lakes, all the while with night-birds swooping overhead looking for their supper, do <u>not</u> belong outside unattended, by my lights. And Bindi did not show up, volunteering for the

job.

So I carried the sodden, shivering little bundle of misery back to the house, shut us both in the lounge and dried us both off.

I had hoped that she would want to go to bed after that experience - I did. But when she found she was kept in, she proceeded to take the room apart, biting me whenever I tried to soothe her.

In the midst of the chaos, one interesting point emerged. She went skittering up the curtain near the glass door, perched precariously on a ¼ " cornice, and looked miserable, like a cat caught up a tree, unable to find a way down. I stretched up my arm, and she started to come forward, automatically, to walk down it, then checked herself, as if the movement was an innate reflex and the thinking possum cancelled it - she didn't want to come to a wicked person who stole babies from their mummies! I had noticed the same apparent innate reflex when I first got Joey - he would automatically, quite naturally, walk down my arm if I put it up to him in a tree; Snoopy, as far as her physical condition would allow her, did the same. I didn't mention it before, because it seemed too unlikely and too inexplicable - their own mothers don't turn their arms into a bridge.

After that I kept Miri in as long as possible. Of course she hated being shut in, and she hated me for doing it. She bit me at every conceivable opportunity. Would you like this to eat? Chomp - the finger, not the food. Would you calm down if I petted you? Chomp. Here, nice little box, just the right size for you, on top of the old standard lamp! Chomp. Oh all right, if you won't settle down, <u>come</u> in under the bedcover. Chomp - and even more chomp that time, as I was still in the lounge, on the banana chair, so she had more of me at her mercy. I got heartily sick of chomp. These weren't play-bites, but the real thing, as hard as her baby jaws could make them.

I hoped that propinquity might imprint her on to me, given time, but with no success. Eventually I had to let her out again. Naturally, she took off, but, as long as I kept my distance, only as far as the small trees around the back of the house.

She behaved like a miniature adult. She didn't play.

Normally, all baby possums are demented. They play wild, fantasizing games, completely wrapped up in their own world, oblivious of approaching danger. Mummy is supposed to take care of that. But Miri somehow knew that she was motherless and couldn't afford this luxury. Instead, she followed a synoptic version of the adult behaviour pattern, moving from tree to tree, eating, meditating or just resting, worn out, in the times when the others would be playing wildly.

Play is necessary to the psychological development of a possum. Baby possums need a mother, any mother. Even a human mother is better than none. Otherwise they lose their childhood, missing a vital part of their life. And even if they survive to adulthood, they are somehow never quite `right'.

She was a very sad, sober little possum.

Nevertheless she <u>was</u> a baby, admit it or not, and occasionally she slipped up, automatically sliding momentarily into one of the play-patterns. I stayed out watching over her, frightened she might forget and slip entirely into her fantasy world. There were frogmouth `owls' about, and one in particular haunted us one night, making exploratory swoops, perching above us poised for the dive, very obviously eyeing this succulent morsel with a view to dinner, just waiting for the opportunity. Miri seemed totally unaware of the potential danger.

One of her rare lapses, however, confirmed something I speculated on earlier, when trying to think what baby possums, deprived of

the luxury of old socks and soforth, might use for war-games. Miri seized upon a bunch of apple-tree leaves which she did not intend to eat, and gleefully proceeded to beat it to death. But the leaves were more or less intact, and still attached to the tree, when she had finished. She was playing.

At first Miri stayed entirely in the low trees around the house, describing a circle through them during the evening, before going back to the house. At that stage I'd nab her, and take her inside. Typically, thoroughgoing little suburbanite that she was, she preferred to eat imported vegetation, scorning mere gums and suchlike, developing a fad for the leaves of the apple tree, preferring to sit in the lemon to `meditate'.

Initially, although she wouldn't come to me and I did have to catch her when she headed home, I could catch her, worn out as she was. Her behaviour inside was consistent with that outside. She sulkily consented to use the small cardboard box I put on the lamp stand, but that was the only concession she made. I was not her mummy, her mummy was a possum and she had once again lost her, so she had to be a grown up possum herself.

Possums mark their possessions by rubbing their chests on them, excreting a fluid from a gland there. At a stage when this gland had not yet properly developed, indeed while she still fitted into one of my hands, she made futile little chest-rubbing gestures against the furniture, false movements, with the position correct, but the chest 1 to 1½ inches from the surface in question.

It was all very much like an Egyptian wall-painting, where the children are depicted as miniature adults.

There was only one gleam of comfort for her. I kept Miri out of Snoopy's bedroom - I had abandoned it myself, moving into the lounge, which was more or less surplus to requirements, and had at one stage been a spare bedroom. But there were still plenty of places around which Snoopy had frequented, and where, for a possum's nose, her scent still lingered, six months after her disappearance.

Miri made a bee-line for such places, sniffing in excitement and delight. Mummy! Mummy had been there, and used to stay there happily content for long periods. She as at least in the right place - Mummy might still come back.

At first I wanted to stop her, but I didn't have the heart.

In a sense, the wraith of Snoopy was the only mother poor little Miri had.

It was the same when I took her to Newport. Her first choice of sleeping place was the divan drawers where Snoopy used to lurk, though she also discovered the virtues of getting under the bedcover (independently, since the bedclothes had been changed and there would have been no scent).

She was a real little street Arab, abusive, bad-tempered, obstreperous and contumelious, at the same time pathetically precocious. Her human equivalent used to wander the streets of Saigon, not so many years ago.

I was very sorry for her, and bitterly regretted that my blundering had left her in this position, but I nevertheless got thoroughly sick of `chomp'. At the time my mother, astonished by Spitfire's behaviour at Newport, was retailing stories of her misdoings. I offered to bring my little larrikin down to meet her little larrikin, and while they kept each other busy we could all get some peace.

Like her human counterpart, Miri started keeping adult hours. I did feed her, but as far as she was concerned she was independent and had to take up the full adult routine in order to survive. The nightly circuit around the back lawn became prolonged until 3 a.m., and, as she grew and as

she became more wily and adept at anticipating my ruses, she began to be harder to catch. In the end I had to content myself with following at a respectful distance, and seeing her safely back to her old nest in the laundry roof.

When she first got up she still came to the window for her breakfast. That was by now the only real opportunity I had to lay my hands on her, so I thoroughly abused it at first, luring her with soft words, then grabbing her as she settled down trustingly to eat, or slamming the window behind her. At this stage, for reasons I will explain, I was staying at Newport on and off and she was too small to leave behind. But more importantly I was still hoping, even at this late stage, to imprint her on to me by keeping her in by force until she forgot about Bindi or anyone else, handling her as much as possible while she was quiescent. The stage wasn't really that late, strictly chronologically or even physiologically speaking. Compared with other babies I've known, who followed the normal pattern with their mothers, she was still only about 2 weeks out of the pouch.

I tried everything to please her, even limiting the light, except when strictly necessary, to one of those miniature hurricane lamps, turned down low. All to no avail. She was nothing if not tenacious of memory, and, young as she was, too much had happened to her. The only result was that she loathed the very sight of me, and became completely distrustful. It took days after each episode for her trust to build up enough for her to let me close enough to destroy it again.

She came at all only because she needed to - she needed to be fed and have someone keep an eye on her outside. But she had inflated ideas of her own maturity and competence - she needed me more than she knew. There was therefore a discrepancy between the amount of time my presence was required in her estimation and mine, and my presence in that gap was tolerated only as a matter of goodwill on her part.

In order to preserve the tattered shreds of that goodwill I ended up having to go to extraordinary lengths in other respects. I found that I must not approach her when she came to the window to eat - if I started to move in her direction she was off like a tiny flash, and, being so tiny, vanished entirely in the bushes for hours, if not the rest of that night and part of the next. I must not even find her outside unless she made herself obvious, deliberately attracting my attention, or at least signifying that she would tolerate my observation.

Like a genuine adult, she would now indeed let me see her - only when she chose. If I did find her when I wasn't supposed to, it was the same again - she disappeared, and in that area, with that sort of terrain, I had no chance in the world of spotting her as long as she chose to hide.

So, in order to be permitted to keep her alive, I had to give way whenever I could, reserving what remained of her trust to be abused when there was real and urgent need to catch her and keep her out of harm's way. If I did spot her when I wasn't supposed to, I had to pretend as hard as I could that I hadn't, for fear of putting her off.

I remember one night, when there was someone else visiting, someone particularly interested in wildlife. We went outside, and I heard the tiny rustle in a particular place, in a particular tree, at a particular time of the evening, which I'd come to know automatically meant that Miri was there, on her way to the window for her dinner. It so happened that I especially wanted to catch her that night, to make one last attempt at imprinting her on to me - enough trust and goodwill had accrued in the previous few days to make it seem worth a try.

My guest didn't seem to notice her, but I was terrified that he

would suddenly spot her and automatically do something that would frighten her off.

So I said, `There's a baby possum in that tree, but for heaven's sake pretend you don't notice her!' The poor fellow must have thought I was stark raving mad. Not only hadn't he heard, but there was Buckley's Chance of his doing so. I had forgotten that hearing possums is not so much a matter of having good ears as a matter of training yourself to take note of the very sounds, slight rustlings and cracklings that suburban humans normally filter out subconsciously as having no significance for them. And even beyond that, the slight rustle I'd heard, out of context, could have been made by anything or nothing - the slightest puff of wind. It was only the coincidence of time, place and circumstance that meant it was Miri, and only my detailed experience of her nightly routine - something he couldn't possibly know - that allowed me to recognise this.

The miniature adult soon proceeded to establish a miniature territory, scaled down in proportion to her size.

At first she confined herself to a circuit of the trees on the back lawn, with the order more or less fixed, dictated by the relative position of the trees and their branches, but the direction of her circuit, clockwise or anti-clockwise, could be varied *ad lib.* But then she started jumping off, as it were, at the lemon tree, heading down towards the downstream corner of the dam, where the cane formed a bridge across the creek just beyond, leading to Bindi's favourite spot for early in the evening. Unlike the other possums, even apart from Snoopy, who were content to trot a short way down the track to the cane, she went instead through the long grass, shrubs and saplings beside the track. For her, with her size it wouldn't have been a short trot so much as a major expedition down the open road.

She proceeded gradually, extending her range each night by one or at most two trees or shrubs, flashing across the ground between them where necessary, then staying in each tree for a while to perform a particular activity appropriate to it, eating or resting or whatever, before flashing to the next `station'. Exactly like an adult possum making its nightly rounds - but with the whole thing done in miniature.

When we eventually reached the cane, she used it, in the traditional manner, to go across the creek. But here we struck trouble.

Miri's attitude to me during this period had been gradually changing, slightly. I had given up trying to force her to do anything except in case of real need,, and she was gradually becoming more tolerant towards me, moving towards me a little in some respects. In terms of her own development - months early, of course, in comparison to babies in normal circumstances - she had reached the stage where the mother-baby relationship is no longer quite so close, as the baby starts making hesitant steps towards independence. While the earlier, more intimate mother-baby relationship with me was intolerable to her - because of its intimacy she was constantly reminded that I wasn't a possum, and it was wrong - she could reconcile herself a little better to what, in any case would have been a looser arrangement.

I must still not approach her, but she could make tentative approaches to me, provided I held still and made only verbal response. I could offer her my fingers, arm outstretched to the full, making it clear that she was out of reach as far as catching her was concerned, and leave it up to her to approach if she wished. Occasionally she communed with my fingertips, holding them in her hands, giving them what were now, thank heavens, love nibbles. But the message was equally likely to be `Go away', conveyed by chomp.

She moved from the nest over the laundry to a position over the open study window, where her food was put out, the place where only a baby, such as Bindi before her, could possibly squeeze through between roof and ceiling. She fell in love with that window, as Joey had done with the window of my room at Newport, playing around on the sill, skittering up and down the curtains, as long as I didn't approach and frighten her away, scared that the window might be slammed behind her. No doubt her affinity started back in the days when, losing her mummy on two occasions, she was reunited with her, as she believed, on the index drawers which formed an inward extension of the sill. In time, however, she seemed to forget that, and just - loved the window.

Occasionally, if I played it very, very cool, she even came in and put herself to bed in the cardboard box I'd made her on top of the standard lamp, with me pretending very hard to be asleep below, as she cut across the banana chair, walking over the top of me, to get to the stem.

At the same time she saw less and less of Bindi, and Bindi saw less and less of her.

It was, I think, on the second occasion that she crossed the creek via the cane, towards Bindi's haunts, that Bindi gave us a warning.

I seem to remember that as she yelled she directed her gaze at me, the supposedly responsible adult in charge, rather than at the baby. In any case, the point was clear: Bindi was not going to interfere with us provided we kept out of her way, but we must not go there. It was in that vicinity that I saw her with Miri and Meggs the time she unsuccessfully tried her diversion trick, and later with Meggs alone, and I spotted at least one potential nest. It seems likely that that was where she stowed Meggs when she put Miri in the roof, and she had come to a very firm decision about double trouble: she wasn't going to risk that sort of mix-up again.

I agreed with her; it was nice to be working with Bindi for once, instead of against her. Miri just meekly obeyed. Thereafter she turned off to the left at that point, proceeding, increasing her range tree by tree, along the narrow bank of earth between the dam and the creek. The cane became just another one of her stopping places along the way.

There was another factor operating to make her visits to the cane brief - ring-tails, or rather one ring-tail in particular.

I had recovered my status in regard to the other local inhabitants with the acquisition of a baby possum to escort - I was once again just another local animal, with legitimate, comprehensible business that obviously didn't involve hunting them, so they were once more free to ignore me. As I mentioned before, there seemed to have been a ring-tail population explosion the previous autumn, and they were all over the place, especially in the belt of vegetation along the creek, all of them once again treating me with ignore, save only for the initial pause for recognition.

I had recently met someone with a professional interest in ring-tails, and offered to take note of any interaction I saw in my travels and pass on the information. On one of the first occasions that Miri went into the cane, the night before we received our warning from Bindi, first one ring-tail, then another, appeared. There were also others around, with directional, belligerent-sounding vocal exchanges on all sides.

`Oh goody!' thinks I, `I shall see some interaction . M--- will be so pleased.'

What seemed to be going on was that a larger ring-tail, who appeared to take a proprietorial interest in the cane patch and surrounding bushes, was squaring off with a smaller one. I am no judge of ring-tails, but if they had been bushy-tails the larger one would have been a female,

pregnant or pouch-gravid, in the aggressive stage where she attacks everything in sight, to secure her nest and territory against intrusion. The smaller one - I got the impression that it was a female, but couldn't swear to it - would have been either a younger female, innocently or otherwise encroaching on the larger one's preserve, or an importunate male making an unwelcome approach. With all this going on, the larger one became more and more furious, working `herself' into a frenzy, driving off the smaller one, then turning on Miri, who happened to find herself in the way.

Interaction! With me hopping up and down impotently on the ground, and poor little Miri trapped on the end of a cane stem twenty feet above my head, I wished they'd go and interact somewhere else!

Miri eventually escaped, thoroughly frightened, but not seriously damaged. I was tempted to storm back to the telephone and say, `Now see here, you know what you can do with your blasted ring-tails. You can...'

It was, in any case, only one ring-tail, and more a mistake than anything else. Thoroughly over-heated by the multiple threats from its own kind, from all sides, it glimpsed something about the right size and shape for a smaller ring-tail, and that was enough for its already over-stimulated aggression. `She' may well have let Miri escape when `she' got close enough, and cooled down enough, to realise the mistake.

The next night Miri went into the cane, and what appeared to be the same ring-tail, larger than the rest of the locals, was also present. They seemed to have reached an understanding - they just stayed apart.

At one point Miri thought she was being chased and fled to the thinnest tip of the stem she was on - good practice for a baby bushy-tail if it's being chased by an adult of its own kind, since the light-framed babies can go right out on the twigs which won't support an adult, but not much use if the pursuer is a ring-tail, probably not much more than twice its own weight, which the same branches can easily support. My impression, however, was that the ring-tail was only coincidentally moving in Miri's direction. `She' seemed reconciled to the situation, provided Miri didn't come too close, and had no further interest in her. `She' probably just wished Miri would take her noisy, clumsy attendant away. That was the only thing I've seen that could be called interaction between ring-tails and bushy-tails, certainly the only thing that could be termed hostile interaction.

Nevertheless, it reinforced Miri's tendency to consider the cane only a temporary stopping place and proceed, gradually further, along the dyke between the creek and the dam, heading upstream.

Even before we got there, I knew where she was heading. Every fit baby possum I've known has made a beeline for the highest tree in the neighbourhood as soon as it starts to establish individual routes which differ from those of its mother. Miri, being Miri, was aiming for the highest <u>imported</u> trees in the neighbourhood, a group of poplars on either side of the creek, adjacent to the drive.

We progressed only gradually, however. At first her routine was absolutely rigid. She had to follow exactly the same route, as if it were a line on the ground and through the trees, and she were a train or a tram, incapable of diverging from the established tracks. Furthermore, she had to perform exactly the same activities in every stopping places as she had when she first extended her line to that point.

For instance, there was one shrub with two parallel trunks growing a couple of inches apart, ideal for Joey's `racing round in circles' game, up one, jump across to the other, down that, jump across to the first and up again. To my delight, Miri, reassured by my presence a respectful three paces behind, succumbed to the temptation when she first found that

shrub. But thereafter, whenever we got to that shrub, she was obliged to at least go through the motions, one token circle, before moving on to the next stopping place, even when she was clearly in a hurry to reach her ultimate goal, the poplars. I seem to recall that on one occasion she actually forgot to perform the necessary ritual, and had to go scampering back and hastily put in the step she had missed.

She was like a human child, obsessively trapped in a fantasy ritual of its own making, stepping on cracks in the pavement, or something such, though with Miri there may have been an added reason. At this stage she was still apparently unable to lay a scent-trail of any sort - she was still making only false chest-rubbing movements. So it may be that her obsession was born of a real need for fierce concentration: she had only her memory to rely on, and dared not alter a single item, for fear of losing the whole sequence.

But after a while, when the route to the poplars had become firmly established, she began to allow herself more flexibility. It was as if she had been firmly sketching out an outline, and, once this was fixed, then proceeded to fill in any gaps, and shade in the open space that the line circumscribed. She now stopped, or went back, to explore the possibilities of shrubs and trees she bypassed before - where they were close together, she had initially left out one or two between her `stations', scampering the extra few feet along the ground in places where that did not entail added danger. And she started to diverge from the `railway line', making exploratory expeditions into the scrub on either side.

Although she could now permit herself to omit some of the `stations' if she were in a hurry to get somewhere in particular, she still usually took the best part of her evening to arrive at the poplars, and it was evident from the general configuration of the terrain, and the distribution of vegetation, that the overall pattern would be to go from there back to the house along the house side of the drive (see Plan, fig.).

But there was a pause before the circuit was finally closed. For several nights she just retraced her steps the way she had come when she decided that it was time to go to bed. Then she experimented, darting across the culvert and returning to the house via the vegetation along the e feeder creek on the other side of the drive, roughly at right angles to Cicada Creek.

This did not please me in the least. While there was an established route for possums that way - in fact part of it was incorporated into Bindi's diagonal route between the house and her upstream nest, which she used when she first had the `twins' - there had never been a ground route for humans through the dense undergrowth. Snoopy had either paraded down the middle of the drive, or, in more circumspect mood, moved from tree to tree along the edge of the drive. Erik, weakened by his illness, similarly chose the easier ground route when in my company, apparently, like Snoopy, relying on me to cope with any terrestrial predators. So I had never had occasion to establish an easy path. The result was that I was forever falling behind, and the process of getting back to the house took about five times longer than it should have, since the tree-route away from the drive was more difficult and circuitous for a worn-out baby possum who felt the time had come for bed. Satisfactory to neither of us.

The quicker, easier way to close the circuit was the way that I had first envisaged, along the other side of the drive. There were no disadvantages to it - for a possum who is not particularly partial to gum leaves, that is. The gaps between the trees which had to be covered on the

ground were no wider, nor more frequent. I tried to show her the alternative route, coaxing her to try it, at least. Needless to say, she took not the slightest notice. But a couple of days after I had given up in despair, she discovered its virtues for herself. Once I had ceased trying to govern her actions, even by the mildest form of direction, she was at liberty to assess the situation for herself, and make up her own mind. Typical.

When the circuit was at last closed, we settled down into a comfortable routine for a while. Again, once she had firmly described the line, she was at liberty to introduce variations, sometimes starting her nightly circle from the other end, moving clockwise instead of anti-clockwise, as well, once again, as straying off the `railway line', exploring sideways, filling in the remaining gaps until the whole area inside the circle round the dam was known and hers.

By this time she had reached the stage where she would have been left alone in the trees for longish periods by her own mother. She had demonstrated a competence beyond her age, and was only going to places well within earshot from the house, so I felt sanguine about leaving her alone once I had seen her to one of her temporary destinations, going back to check on her only once every hour or so, and at possum bedtime to see her safely home, otherwise removing my offensive presence, in the best possum traditions.

Naturally, with true possum perversity, it was at this stage that she started to decide that my presence was no longer offensive - in fact it was somewhat desirable. As I mentioned before, she had begun to find the looser relationship with me, not so different from the looser relationship she would have had with her own mother at this stage, more tolerable, and maternal activities of appropriate sort on my part more acceptable. But I was never really her mother. I was in much the same position my mother had been in with young Joey, when I had to leave him in her charge while I worked late. I was the baby sitter. I was expected to provide for her comfort, producing food on demand, and protect her from any danger that might come along, but I had no authority whatsoever. I was just the hired help. I was expected, on the contrary, to give way and pander to young madam's every whim, never imposing my own ideas upon her even by inducement or cajolery.

Once that was settled, and I knew my place and kept to it, she decided that I was better than nothing, and my presence had its advantages. Whenever I went out to check, and called her, she would pop out of hiding, somewhere up in the foliage of a tree, `answering' in the way Joey and Snoopy had done, by making herself audibly, and if I still failed to find her, visibly conspicuous. Once I had arrived and contact had been made, she obviously relaxed, playing a little, or, if not that, at least indulging in actions precluded by lone baby's need to remain unobtrusive, the extravagant gymnastic movements in which youngsters take delight, or expressing in noisy appreciation their pleasure in the leaves they are eating - all the things a possum finds most gratifying, but can do only when it is safe. When I first came out there would have been nothing but silence, or at most a slight rustling that could have been anything.

On only one occasion did the wrong possum `answer'. It was certainly a youngster, in the poplars where I expected Miri to be, but it looked too large, and somehow unfamiliar. It seemed to realise that it had made a mistake, too, and became nervous, edging away through the trees. Whereupon Miri, who had apparently taken fright at the approach of a stranger and frozen, unable to identify it as innocuous before I did it for her, duly appeared up another poplar nearby. I haven't the least doubt that

the other youngster was Meggs, hopeful of getting an extra feed, then frightened off by the calculated results of his own temerity.

Miri even started to show signs of disappointment if I left immediately when I had seen that she was all right. She liked having me around so she could relax for a while, perhaps show off a little. Besides, her ambitions were expanding again, and it would be reassuring, at least, if I could be persuaded to stick around as bodyguard.

The first intimation I had of this was when I went out one night and found her playing around in a cleared space a few yards up the slope on the other side of the creek, opposite the house. I didn't think much of that at all - a very small possum muddling about on the ground alone was not my idea of a safe possum. So I stuck with her more closely after that, and found that she had set about exploring the slope of the hill on the other side of the creek. This was an area with saplings and lighter, smaller vegetation, which had never attracted much attention from any of the adults. They went through it sometimes, to move from the larger trees upstream to those downstream, or vice versa, or visited it occasionally, presumably when some particularly delectable type of vegetation was in season, but there were, on the whole, bigger and better things elsewhere, with larger branches which made for easier travelling for a big possum. Miri, of course, had no such inhibitions - everything was scaled down to her size.

Our relations reached their most congenial phase at this point - now that their basis had been clarified. I still might not approach her, but her own approaches to me were becoming more frequent, and sometimes she even touched me before she panicked and ran away. In due course this became ritualized into a game. She would approach my feet, tentatively, filled with delicious trepidation, nip the toe of my gym boot - hard, but for her a play bite - then race away before retribution could follow, only to come back immediately, with ostentatious stealth and caution, to do the same again. Whereas once it might have been real, her exaggerated movements, the moderation of her attack, and the perfunctoriness of her flight proclaimed that for once she was really playing. If she had been a human of similar age she would have been squealing and giggling her head off.

It reminded me very, very much of a game we used to play when I was a child. We would convince ourselves, on the flimsiest excuse or none at all, that a certain place was haunted, or a certain rock shelter contained - oh horror! - BONES. And we would approach it gradually, daring ourselves and each other to go closer, nearer and nearer until we finally lost our nerve and ran shrieking in delectable terror. Only to start another approach. It's a very good game. The only thing to watch out for, with both young humans and young possums, is that they don't get over-excited.

Or, by way of variation, Miri would come and peer at me around the trunk of a tree, waiting for me to make the appropriate response. And I would say, `Boo!', or move my hand a fraction, anything that would suffice to show that I was pretending to chase her. Terror! Panic! She fled for her life. A whole three feet around the trunk of the tree to the other side, popping her head around the corner and peering at me, waiting to be `chased' again. Again it was a ritualization of our former bad times, the stage when I was pouncing on her at every opportunity. But it ended up as the same game of chasings I'd played with Joey and Kylie.

It was so good to see Miri actually playing at last, not just the previous inadvertent slips into one of the standard play patterns, cut short as soon as she realised what she was doing, that I didn't in the least mind being the bogeyman.

She really was by nature the dearest, sweetest little girl,

pathetically obedient to the only person to whom a baby possum should owe allegiance, her mummy - which I was not. It wasn't her fault that circumstances had made a Biting Beast of her.

And I remember that it was on one of our expeditions up the slope that I suddenly saw, to my astonishment, that she still had her fluffy `puppy fur'. After all that, she was still only a baby.

That was the middle of November. As far as I could estimate her age, she was just under two months old.

However, there was a more ominous side to her explorations over the creek. Her gradual expansion of her range was bringing her nearer and nearer to where a couple of dogs were chained at night. Very nice dogs, both, and I was quite prepared to love them in the daytime. But their record was such that I wasn't prepared to trust them with a baby possum. It was too likely that they would wake suddenly, see a tiny shape darting past, and snap it in two on a reflex action, before they realised what was happening. I wouldn't trust, or blame, any cat, dog or other natural predator under those circumstances. It was far better not to let the circumstances arise.

But there wasn't much I could do about it. I knew by now, of never before, that any sign of disapproval from me would only strengthen her resolve to proceed in that direction. Nor could I rely on her contrasuggestiveness, and pretend to encourage her, secure in the knowledge that she would promptly develop a rooted aversion to the place, for possums can sometimes be led where they cannot be driven. All I could do was stick very closely to her whenever she went that way.

But both these trends, good and bad, were abruptly cut short, when external events supervened.

My father had been intermittently unwell since the beginning of spring. From the beginning of November it had become evident that there was something seriously wrong. Characteristically, he refused all persuasion and entreaties to see a doctor, until, at the beginning of December, he was suddenly taken to hospital with what proved to be an inoperable brain tumour. He responded, unexpectedly, to radiotherapy, and was released from hospital at the end of the following summer at his own request, and remained at home until he died the following September.

The circumstances of his illness were such that I had to go home. I went myself, and took Miri and the cats, at the beginning of December - typically, Miri managed to hold up the works by refusing to be caught and disappearing into the roof, so I had to go back the next night for her. She was very competent, and if she had been only one month older, I would have left her to her own devices, but she was just that little bit too small.

The situation with my father meant that I was spending most of my time at the hospital, or with my mother at Newport, and it soon became clear that I would have to stay at Newport for some time at least, and I would not be going back to Ingleside. I didn't have the time to move out immediately, but I kept going back when I had a few hours to spare to gradually collect various items.

Almost every time I was there at night, Bindi, hardly the worse for wear, appeared promptly at the study window, half an hour after the lights went on, responding to that signal of my presence almost at punctiliously as Snoopy used to respond to the reverse signal, extinguishing the lights.

Towards the end of summer 1976, just five years after we had arrived, I finally moved out. Needless to say, I left Snoopy's bed where it was. A pointless, sentimental gesture, but the only gesture that would have

made any sense at all to her. As far as I am concerned, that's one nest that can remain empty.

When I first brought Miri to Newport, I installed her in her old cardboard box from the standard lamp, on top of the wardrobe in my room. I intended to take her out gradually, slowly assimilating her with her new surroundings, but I had to go to the hospital at nights for the first three days, and so Miri was left alone, shut in my room. On the third night she took matters into her own hands, prising open the flyscreen over a small ventilation window, and departing.

After giving me the horrors about which I could do nothing for a night, she returned to the room of her own accord, sullen and subdued. Like Snoopy when we first moved to Ingleside, she had discovered that there was no way home, and, given that, she was better off with me than without.

After that there seemed no point in keeping her in. She was quite capable of handling her own assimilation. So I left the window open and she came and went as she pleased, returning every morning to sleep on the wardrobe.

To my relief, the locals did not give her the traditional reception reserved for strange adults. By the time she got out she had been in the room for three days - she would have smelt of the room, and me, and herself, not of a strange female. Those who were there when I used to bring Snoopy down probably assume it was the same possum - a small female who was somehow my baby. To the rest she was just another one of the current multitude of local youngsters. The flyscreen on the window had once again done its work. She could see out, hear out and smell out, and be seen, heard and smelt for three days before she got out, and she merged into the local life with the minimum of fuss. The rest weren't really very concerned with one extra local youngster provided she minded her manners and kept in her place; they ignored her, just as they did the other youngsters.

To the best of my knowledge, and my relief, she never did encounter Spitfire - who in any case, like Miri herself, had mellowed with age.

But if the local possums took scant notice of Miri, she watched their every move, avidly, her eyes riveted to them with acolyte zeal. At last, these were <u>proper</u> possums, the sort she'd always known she wanted to be. If she studied them very, very hard, she could grow up into one of those.

At that stage the nightly feed group, when I had time to conduct it, was held in the trees just outside my window, with a later session further down towards the creek. Some of the more self-confident, or impudent ones, the foxy-poss's in particular, came along the ground, plucked my trouser-leg to get my attention and their share, and plumped down to eat it where they were, but most of them sat, each in his or her appointed tree, taking their bread from a flexible plastic dish screwed on to the end of a longish piece of doweling. So a kind of breadline formed.

In due course, on a couple of occasions, I discovered that I had an extra possum on the end of the line, a demure, reticent little female, who asked, shyly and politely, for her share, in the same manner she saw the others asking.

Well, I hope I know my lines. I dutifully put a piece of bread in the dish and passed it up to her. She took it carefully, copying exactly the movements the others made. And, of course, dropped it after a couple of token bites, since she'd had a full dinner in my room before she went out, five or ten minutes before. It wasn't the bread that counted - the whole point of the performance, the observance of ceremony, was the gesture of being a possum just like the others.

For what it is worth, she certainly fitted in with the rest as far as looks were concerned - though I was shortly to have dramatic proof of just how unimportant looks are to a possum in terms of recognition. She could well have been a cross between Jenny-poss's and Sally's long, thin-snouted family - there were others about. Strange as it may seem, I had never, before we moved to Newport, had a good look at her face-markings. Given our fleeting contacts, their nature, and the fact that most of our business was conducted in the dark or low light, for her sake, I had had little opportunity; the fact that her long, thin, pointed Snoopy-like features, and the enormous ears, made her quite distinctive from Meggs, the only other youngster with whom she might be confused, meant that I gave such time as I got with her to more important things. The only time I had really looked was the first night I got her, and since babies' face-markings only gradually become defined, she was too young then to tell very much - and even then, because she was so young, I kept her head under my coat, out of the light, as much as possible.

Now I discovered, somewhat to my astonishment, that she had, of all things, a Jenny-mark. And, worse than that, she had an identical twin.

It is a measure of just how much the front, hand-like paws monopolise one's attention that I had not previously realised that some of the younger Newport possums, Dido among them, had lighter coloured hind feet, as Miri did. Dido's current son, Grub, was virtually identical to Miri. At that stage his genital organs were immature, and the scrotum was often hidden by the luxuriant fur on his underside. I tried very hard to find some other difference, but the only thing I could discover was that the skin on his tail-tip was light, while Miri's was dark.[cc]

When I couldn't see the end of the tail, I really couldn't be sure whether the small, nervous possum sitting on my window was Grub looking for his bed-time snack, or Miri, on her way home - until it either went away or came in and put itself to bed on the wardrobe.

As I said, just another local youngster.

Like the others she grew, and as she grew she started to attract more hostile attention from the adults. She started coming in with bits of fur out, and signs of a salutary beating by something larger, though nothing untoward compared with the others. She acquired, however, a little L-shaped scar in her right ear, not the sort which lasts forever, but enough to mitigate the identity crisis temporarily. And then, inevitably, one night she failed to return. After great consternation on my part, she turned up safe and sound the next night. After that, she started occasionally missing a night. I knew what was happening, and no longer got so frantic.

Her absences gradually became more and more frequent, and sometimes she missed several nights in a row. But on these occasions she turned up at sunset, for the feed group outside my window, on the second and third nights, always from the direction of the same neighbouring house, departing afterwards in the same direction.

I didn't like that at all, so I hastily constructed a Honey-type possum box on a post outside my window - then had to add another when one of the adults, `Pumpkin', who was singularly ill-quartered under the open eaves, started to take an interest in it. I had the second half-finished box in my room while Miri was there, and she showed some mild enthusiasm about it; the next day I put her outside in it to sleep.

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cc. I was later to find, by close observation, that this can in fact vary, at least insofar as a possum born with a dark tail-tip at times appears to have a light, or partially light one, usually when there has been some minor abrasion or other injury and there is a temporary covering of light-coloured scar tissue.

But it was too late, she had already made up her mind, and there was nothing I could do about it. In any case, I'd made the mistake of siting the box on what, with this added convenience, promptly became a possum main road, far too vulnerable for a nervous young female, although it did at one later stage serve as a temporary refuge for one of the juvenile males.

Miri now absented herself more often than she returned, although she always turned up at night to be fed with the others. There was nothing I could do except see the people where I thought she might be living. She certainly hadn't picked the least hospitable house in the vicinity; they weren't exactly possum-lovers, but there had long been possums in the roof, which ones, they didn't know; they promised to let me reclaim my responsibility if it ever got to the point where the possums had to be deported.

Miri's resolve was nothing if not strengthened when she arrived in one night to find her spot on the wardrobe occupied. `Pumpkin''s leviathan son Elephant, though chronologically older than Miri and of course about eight times her size, was mentally and emotionally still a baby - Miri, of course, was extremely precocious in that respect. Like a good many baby possums - and a good many baby humans - he occasionally fell out with his mother and ran away from home, making a transient, premature, false gesture towards independence. On this occasion he turned up in my room very late one night and put himself to bed on the wardrobe, looking so woebegone and lost that I didn't have the heart to turn him out. Miri had been absent for the previous few nights, and I didn't really expect her to come inside to sleep again. But sure enough, she picked that very night to turn up, and finding her nest occupied departed again, downcast,

After that she slept there even more infrequently, then not at all. She also started missing coming to the feed group, first the occasional night, then more often, then sometimes two nights in a row, and eventually I saw her not at all.

It was all very gradual and normal. Some females manage to stay on in the area where they were born and establish themselves there as adults, others depart for somewhere nearby. Miri had no deep attachment, either to me or to the place, and I hadn't really expected her to stay. She was by then four months old - early, but not unprecedented, and she was very mature and competent for her chronological age. There was nothing sinister about her departure.

Miri, who came from Newport and returned to Newport, had finally managed, despite everything, to grow up into what she always asserted she was - a <u>proper</u> suburbanite possum.

2. Old Acquaintance.

ELEPHANT'S MOTHER

When I first started going back to Newport regularly, in early spring 1975, it became apparent, as I said, that we had an identity crisis on our hands. At the time Jenny, as we thought, was camping under the eaves and had finally produced another baby, the huge Jenny Junior. It shortly emerged that Jenny Junior was a male - who thereafter became known by his `love name', Elephant.

It also emerged that something very strange indeed was occurring - Jenny had developed the power of bilocation. At the same time as she was under the eaves, she was also in her favourite nest in the corner of the kitchen ceiling.

Furthermore, she had developed some very uncharacteristic ways.

She tried on at least one occasion to leave Elephant with me while she went off for the night, waiting until I coaxed the amiable, gentle little fellow on to my lap, in an effort to establish his sex once and for all, then swiftly departing, only to be recalled by an agonized shout of `Jenn-ny!' from me when another large female made a purposeful approach towards me and the baby. Well, that was Jenny all right.

But then there occurred a second incident - I was squatting down feeding Elephant and Jenny on the ground, when Jenny suddenly decided to get up and spread herself across my shoulders, for no reason other than that, like Mrs. Poss of old, she liked being there.

I was duly flattered, but a little saddened, too. Jenny was always so proud and aloof, shunning physical contact, that I somehow didn't like to see her change, even in old age.

Eventually, of course, we saw them together, both Jennys at the same time - in fact I had already done so without knowing it, in the would-be baby-sitting incident. And it was easy to work out, in retrospect, what had happened.

It was the old, old story - you only see what you look for. Jenny was the first possum, apart from Joey, that we could recognise as an individual. Apart from the occasional mix-up with Joe, when Jenny was still smallish, so that the size discrepancy wasn't too apparent, and Joe had not developed enough of the reddish colouring for it to be conspicuous, we had never been in any doubt about her. Particularly in later years, when she was so obviously the largest and oldest of the group, and, to boot, developed what appeared to be cataracts over nearly half the surface of each eye, she was so distinctive that we knew her at first glance. We didn't need to look at the details, so we didn't bother.

About a year or so before, another mature female, very like Jenny, had turned up. Although she was a mature, middle-aged possum, she hadn't quite reached her final proportions, so there was still no chance of confusion with Jenny - in any case the cataracts put the matter beyond doubt. She seemed to know the place, and favoured the open nests under the eaves, where Jenny often used to camp with her babies around the time she had Pumpkin and Toots. We assumed that it was one of Jenny's adult daughters returned - which, we couldn't be sure. We called her `Pumpkin' because her nature - placid, gentle amenable but somehow dim by comparison with the superbright Jenny - seemed very reminiscent of the beautiful, fluffy, sweet-natured little ash-blond who had managed to mislay Dido somewhere in the roof, for Jenny to find.

She certainly seemed to answer to `Jenny', but that didn't help at all. Jenny never really seemed to know her name: she was a young adult when we first knew her, and if she were accustomed to any such human impositions it would have been one given her by the neighbours who, unbeknownst to us, had fed the local possums for years. But Jenny's children, constantly in her company and used, from the time they were in the pouch, to hearing frequent repetitions of that sound, associated it with friendly human beings and feeding - and attention, when the baby in question was the sort of individual that liked that sort of thing - all became accustomed to that name as well, in some cases, as their own.[xxxv]

So we could tell nothing about `Pumpkin's' true identity from her propensity to answer to `Jenny', and her failure to show any special response to the other names we tried on her. You could, as they say, call her anything but late-for-breakfast. She came as well to Mumma Bear as anything else.

At the time, it didn't matter - she was quite distinct from Jenny, firstly because of the slight, but marked, disparity in size, and

secondly because of the cataracts. We noticed that the younger possum, too, seemed to be developing cataracts, but at first they were so slight that, reassured, after our first panic, by Jenny's behaviour, which made it clear that sight impediments were not a serious disadvantage to a possum as long as it stayed in a known place, we took no notice. We all had other things on our minds at the time.

Of course, during our inadvertence, the younger possum grew just that little bit more, to bring her up to Jenny, and the cataracts spread, so that suddenly, by the time Elephant arrived on the scene and we started to take more conscious notice, we were faced with the spectacle of two Jennys.

We could tell them apart, now that we specifically looked for variation in detail. The one in the ceiling over the kitchen had longer, thinner features, and, though it is so variable that one cannot be sure, seemed, from her movements and behaviour, slightly older.[xxxvi] But then she didn't have a spring baby to try to keep up with - and this does have an effect. The sight of the other elderly lady skittishly romping with Elephant looked incongruous, not to say absurd, but is not unprecedented. The possum under the eaves, Elephant's mother, had slightly broader, blunt, bear-like features, reminiscent of Mrs. Poss, but, beauty aside, Mrs. Poss and Jenny had been so close that we had always speculated that they might have been mother and daughter. Without Mrs. Poss for direct comparison, we couldn't swear that Jenny hadn't resembled her to that degree.

So which one was Jenny?

I thought I had it sorted out at one stage - I knew that the naked skin on Jenny's tail-tip, like that of those of her babies I'd had most to do with, was dark; I remember noting the first possums I saw with light-coloured skin on the tips as exceptions. The possum in the ceiling seemed to have darker coloured skin on her tail-tip, while the one under the eaves had noticeably lighter skin, at least on one side of the tip. But as I watched, over a period of several nights, the other possum also developed temporary lighter blotches - I can only guess that it was a matter of minor abrasions, over which temporary scar tissue was building up. The cataracts on the eyes of the one under the eaves were worse, covering about half one eye and more than half the other - but that didn't help, either.

In the end, it sorted itself out, mainly on character. Jenny, the same Jenny we had always known, was the possum in the ceiling in the corner of the kitchen, always her favourite nest, and used by her almost invariably since the days of Pumpkin and Brat, because of the tendency of those adult daughters to take over, or be ceded, the position under the eaves. The possum under the eaves, Elephant's mother, was not Jenny.

Who was `Pumpkin'? We'll never know for sure.[xxxvii] But whoever she was she was a very strange lady...

Other possums, usually females in the process of having babies, occasionally bring leaves back to their nests. That is to say, a few leaves, once every so often, in moderation. But `Pumpkin' regularly transported half a forest, branches two feet or more in length, from distances, where the particular trees could be identified, of up to fifty feet. Having detached her chosen branch from the tree, she twined her tail around the stem (curling it downwards, the normal direction in which a bushy-tail's tail curls, not upwards and back like a ring-tail), in an extended spiral running the length of the stem, and proceeded to manhandle it through the tree-tops, catching it in all the small branches along the way, then dragging it across the roof until she got it into her nest.

This is presumably some vestigial reflex, but whether hoarding or nest-building I'm still not quite sure. Inevitably, she would lose a large percentage of her prizes *en route*, often just in the last somersault

to go under the eaves. But I don't know what she did with what she managed to get home - my impression is that she didn't actually do very much at all with it.

She didn't build a formal nest, though it may have served as bedding. It usually seemed to be edible varieties of leaves that she brought[dd] - including camphor laurel, which, like lantana, gave me the horrors when I first saw a lively youngster wading into it with gusto; that youngster, however, was Timmy, who remained very much alive. When the leaves were edible, `Pumpkin' sometimes absent-mindedly nibbled a bit, but not to any great extent. When the leaves dried out and, presumable, became scratchy, she pushed them out of the nest, over the side, down to the ground.

Well, everyone should have a hobby, and some of ours are equally atavistic.

`Pumpkin' would never explain it to me. My impression - no more than that - is that mother possums do `explain' things to their babies, at least in terms of reassurance. If the mother is performing some action which is new and incomprehensible to the baby, and the youngster becomes agitated, whether through fear or curiosity, mumma just keeps on doing what she's doing, slowly and deliberately, giving the baby every chance to see what is going on, until the baby works it out for itself. Certainly, in this sense, both Mrs. Poss and Snoopy were usually happy to `explain' things to me, if I evinced an appropriate sort of interest. But all I got from `Pumpkin' was a `mind-your-own-business' scowl, and a temporary pause, then the activity carried on rapidly when I refused to go away.

About all I managed to glean was her method of detaching the chosen portion from the tree - at first I thought she might be collecting loose pieces that had come off of their own accord, but the frequency, and the state of the ends of the stems, soon disabused me of that notion. I saw her one night acquiring the leaves off a very large (ca. 20 ft.) brasseia. She stopped when I approached, and shifted to a position where she was hidden from me by the leaves, but I saw enough to determine that it wasn't an `either/or' situation: she didn't either bite through the stem or pull it off with her hands, but used mouth and hands as necessary, to get it off somehow.

Obviously, it was a private thing with `Pumpkin'. Equally obviously, it was something that was very important to her. When one of her babies, Marco, was injured, and she had to park him with me for the first couple of nights in order to get out herself, her first priority when she got out was not eating, but collecting her dratted leaves and dragging them back over the roof.

But I doubt whether even she herself really knew why she did it, though she may have had some private possum rationale - perhaps she got the idea from watching the nest-building ringtails, who so bemused me and Mrs. Poss, in the area on the bank opposite the eaves.

The analogy with human hobbies may well be more significant than just a casual metaphor. There are, no doubt, deep psychological reasons, some of them atavistic, why a given person chooses a particular hobby, but once it has become a hobby the doing of it becomes an end in its own right, divorced from, and independent of, the root causes of the selection. It is almost impossible to say, just by looking at the result, precisely why a

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dd. At present (1997), at least one of the house females, as yet unidentified, is making a habit of collecting the leaves of such giant privets as I have not yet managed to eradicate. To the best of my knowledge, privet leaves are not edible.

given person takes up stamp-collecting, or fishing, or tennis.

In the same way, it was the doing of it that counted with `Pumpkin', rather than the result. If I picked up one of the branches she'd dropped in her last somersault into her nest, or picked another one from one of the trees she regularly raided and offered it to her, she just pushed it straight out again, over the edge of the wall and on to the ground. The point of the exercise was getting it there herself - I doubt she really knew what to do with it once she'd got it there.

She did it because it was her thing - carting High Birnam Wood to Dunsinane.

She always seemed to have difficulty with her babies when living under the eaves - they kept falling out, apparently because her pouch had been damaged by the oversized Elephant. When, as I'll explain later, she heroically ceded a more luxurious nest to her daughter, Chrissie, and moved back under the eaves, despite the fact that she clearly found the stone walls very cold on old bones, I put up a small box for her near her usual position. Because possums usually regard such impositions with extreme suspicion, refusing to go near them for at least two weeks, I didn't fasten it into position, in case she was so affronted by its presence in her private domain that she wanted to push it out.

Instead, she moved in the same night, and rarely slept anywhere else after that, so I had no opportunity to remedy the deficiency; when her huge, absurd daughter insisted on moving back in with her, their combined bulk kept pushing the box out from the wall and over the edge. In the the end I gave up, for fear of damage to the windows below when it came tumbling down. But when the crisis with Marco arose, and she was in dire need of somewhere safe to keep him, I replaced it. She moved in the same night, installing herself, her baby - and her leaves.

The ground immediately below `Pumpkin''s favourite position under the eaves became carpeted, to a depth of several inches, with discarded leaves from a variety of trees - which did not grow in the immediate vicinity. In due course, this broke down to form a perfectly splendid soil, and `Pumpkin''s trophies, though enormous by comparison to her own size, were not so large, nor so frequently taken from the same tree, as to cause any visible damage to their source. Well, if she was prepared to go to all that trouble to oblige us with topsoil for the garden...[xxxviii]

Because of the circumstances surrounding my father's illness, in the first part of 1976 I lost track of those possums who didn't decide that if neither my mother nor I was coming out to feed them,, they would come in my window and get it themselves. Before the hiatus the adult females present were Jenny, `Pumpkin', Dido, Battered Baby, Sherry and Twiddy; the youngsters were Grub, Elephant, Miri and Spitfire. I never entirely lost track of any of the adult females for long enough not to be sure of her when I saw her again: I fed - and occasionally saw - Sherry and later Spitfire in their tree, and more rarely fed Twiddy. Baby, characteristically, joined the bun rush to my room - there wouldn't have been any doubt about her even if she hadn't - and the two little boys, Grub and Elephant, naturally followed their mothers to my window.

The males were a different story. Old Pig came to my window from the first. But it was some time before two smaller males stated arriving. Before the hiatus there was Big (Old) Pig and two smaller ones, Horrible and Little Pig, all somewhat similar in appearance, except that the two younger ones tended more towards the long, thin, lacertian features of Sally's family. After the hiatus, there were still three of them, and there was still a kind of generic pigginess about all three. But beyond that, I could not be sure of the two smaller ones.

HORRIBLE The less doubtful was `Horrible'. The original Horrible earned his name equally by his character and his appearance - scruffy, unkempt, somehow giving a squamous impression, although he had, of course, fur like everyone else; his facial features would not have disgraced a Dickensian villain - one thinks of Uriah Heep.

He was quite neurotic, vacillating between extreme timidity and extreme temerity. One minute he would be scrambling up your leg, or up the piece of doweling of the feeding stick, like an old-fashioned monkey-on-a-stick toy, unable to wait his turn for food, terrified he might miss out - so anxious in fact that he automatically tried to eat whatever he found when he got to the top, whether it was bread or hand. Then the next minute he would take fright, panicking at absolutely nothing, dropping whatever food he'd managed to get in his flight. When you did finally manage to get something to him, to keep him quiet while you fed the others, he would wolf it and be back before the next possum had properly started on its share, and before you had a chance to attend to any of the others who had arrived in the interim. You didn't need to be a psychologist to see that it was all caused by the same basic neurotic insecurity - fear that he might miss out, fear of the other possums, fear of his own shadow, panphobia, in fact. But that didn't make him any less painful - physically or mentally.

Dido, the female half of Jenny's `twins', was very similar, although in her it was modified by natural female aggressiveness, while in him it was exacerbated by male timidity, and increasing age and size calmed her down - at least as far as climbing up 6 ft. pieces of ¼" diameter doweling was concerned. She, at least, had one demonstrable excuse for her insecurity - the trauma of losing her mother, and the subsequent tension of sharing what should have been her exclusive privileges with Another Possum, albeit a very small one, and, unbeknownst to her, probably the rightful possessor of those privileges. To my knowledge, he had no such excuse - my memory is a little hazy, but I think he was already around, as a newly arrived young adult, when Di was a baby, and so could not be Dinky.

It is a sobering thought that what was very likely the offspring of an unholy union between those two, Grub, survived his childhood to depart, and be turned loose on the world.

Understood or not, the fact remains that they could be pests, Horrible in particular. They seemed all the worse by contrast with the rest of the possums who, regardless of their behaviour towards one another, were incredibly gentle with their tame humans, despite the fact that this makes great demands on them to constrict their movements, since they are unable to retract their claws. On the rare occasions when one of them forgot himself so far as to climb up a leg in anxiety to get the bread, he or she managed to do so without inflicting any damage. They were all, apart from Dido and Horrible, very, very careful, and really quite polite.

Yet somehow Horrible grew on you. His attendance had always been erratic, and during one of his absences there was a male possum killed on the road just outside our place. We couldn't be sure which one it was, since there were several, among them Horrible and Little Pig, who were virtually physically identical; a dead possum, shorn of its personality, in the daytime, looks very different from any possum that you have only seen very much alive at night. But it did look a lot like Horrible, and his silly panics made him an obvious candidate for running straight under a car. I think we were all secretly relieved when he turned up, only too palpably alive, a couple of nights later.

The first of the smaller males to arrive at my window after the hiatus looked exactly like Horrible, and behaved exactly like him. Just as jittery, just as neurotic, just as persistent. Once he arrived for the

night, he was in and out the window like a yo-yo, snatching pieces of bread, dropping them, running away, darting back, panicking at my slightest move, or suddenly emboldened, marching in across the bed, then abruptly terrifying himself with his own boldness, panicking again, and fleeing out the window, leaving a trail of devastation behind. Sensible possums arrive, sit down on the window, or, feeling more sociable, on the window ledge or card index drawers, eat their slice of bread, and depart in good order, without being a nuisance to me or themselves, unless put to flight by the approach of a social superior. But `Horrible' didn't wait to be routed - he routed himself.

On occasion, when I became exasperated with him, I applied the method that had proved effective with Kylie and Rastus, and roared at him in his own language. He reeled, physically, as if struck by a gale, and departed out the window. But then the pendulum would swing back, and five minutes later he'd be in again, as bold as brass. I called him `Horrible', but I think the inverted commas are only pedantic. Whether or not he was Horrible, he certainly was horrible.

CATS Sheba was now much improved, and the nose-touching greeting, though seldom used between the possums themselves, other than between mother and baby, was now fairly often used between the possums and both my cats. In particular, a species of love-hate relationship existed between Smiley and Old Pink Pig. Sometimes Smiley seemed to sense that Pig was a `tom', and so a rival, and occasionally Pig made as if he was curious to know what Smiley's rump tasted like, but for the most part they got on very well. It was between them that the nose-touching greeting was most often performed (but of course never when I happened to have a camera handy!) and Pig very frequently plumped down on the bed to eat his bread with Smiley a few feet or so away, neither of them in the least worried by the presence of the other. Smiley obviously had a hierarchical system of his own: I was his boss, but when I was absent from the room he was in charge. But the only other person, feline, human or trichosurine, he managed to convince was Pig - when I refused Pig's requests to impart yet more food, he sometimes turned around and went and importuned Smiley in similar manner.

Smiley's tolerance later paid off in a `Brer Rabbit and the Briar Patch' incident. My parents' old tomcat was quite naturally not overjoyed at Smiley's arrival and sometimes, when he felt a bit bored, still set about stirring Smiley, usually with some characteristic fiendish psychological twist to his stratagems. On this occasion he had Smiley trapped on the greenhouse roof one night, and refused to let him come down. Now like everyone else, not least of all Smiley, Old Cat knew that this was no place for a cat to be at night. Possums are constantly thundering across it, less like the Charge of the Light Brigade than the charge of a brigade of cataphracts. But all that came a-thundering while Smiley was up there was Old Pink Pig, who said, `Hello,' accepted a piece of bread from me, and sat down to eat it peaceably a couple of feet away, taking Smiley's inevitable hiss of distaste for what it had now become - no more than a formality, almost a greeting.

PIGLET `Pumpkin' had two babies under the eaves after she first arrived (or returned, as the case may be), two boys, the enormous Elephant and the more moderate Piglet.

Grub and Elephant departed in due course, and the only autumn baby in 1976 was indeed Piglet, he of the vanishing dinner incident. Elephant's departure was somewhat tardy: after his temporary sojourn on my wardrobe in the last days of Miri's occupation he had returned to his mother and stayed firmly put until Piglet was actually out of the pouch, and his occasional attacks of bad humour started putting the baby at risk.

Whereupon, `Pumpkin' firmly despatched him.

I knew quite a lot about Piglet from the beginning, raised, as he was, in full view from the ground, under the eaves. As I mentioned before, just to add to the identity crisis, `Pumpkin', like Jenny, was having trouble with her pouch. As a result, Piglet kept slipping out, long before he should have been out of the pouch, in the nest or anywhere else. In fact it was at this stage that he first managed to tumble over the edge of the wall and slide down. I returned him, hairless and decidedly slippery, to his mother in the feeding dish (fully 5" in diameter) on the end of the stick, trusting that she would have the common sense to know that he wasn't something to eat. She did.

Like Elephant before him, he sometimes had the odd tiff with his mother and moved out, prematurely declaring independence for a day or two. Little possums do this no less than little humans: they `go out into the garden and eat worms', they tie up all their worldly possessions in a spotted handkerchief on the end of a stick and run away from home. I'd had a couple of sick possums in my care for a few days, one of them `Miri', and since the top of the wardrobe was obviously the place where they felt most at home, I'd leant a casuarina branch from the window to the top of the wardrobe to facilitate their access. Piglet, like Elephant before him, was quick to realise the advantages of my room, and especially of the wardrobe, and moved in whenever he ran away from home. `Pumpkin' obviously knew - on a couple of occasions during his fits of pique she came in and, nose to the branch, followed his trail up to the top of the wardrobe. Apparently satisfied that he was safe and undamaged, she then proceeded to ignore her sulky brat, and waited calmly for him to get over his pettishness and go home - which, of course, he always did.

He made a more serious show of declaring independence when he was about three months old, moving out for several days and taking up residence in one of the boxes I'd put up outside my window when Miri was in the process of departure at about six months old.

TWO SICK POSSUMS

Soon after Miri left Honey came down with a very severe attack of the same blight that Erik had had, and which seems endemic among bushy-tails. I took her into protective custody in my room, but in the confusion caused by my father's illness I inadvertently left my window open during the day, and she vanished. I gave her up for dead.

Then I found Sherry, similarly wandering around on the ground during the day, in what appeared to be a febrile state. She too disappeared from my room under like circumstances, in worse condition than Honey. There seemed even less doubt about her fate. All the foxy-possums seemed particularly susceptible to this horrible thing,[xxxix] and got at least a mild attack once a year, but Sherry really seemed to be beyond hope.

But Sherry turned up in her tree six weeks later, perfectly normal from the waist up, as she leant out of the tree to reach for the food. When she came out completely, however, she was naked from the waist down, with her tail lacerated and apparently paralyzed.

She gradually recovered the use of her tail, and the only lasting effect was that she seemed to be permanently stripped to her underwear (or underfur) below the waist, and had a particularly scruffy-looking tail. She continued to produce and raise babies to maturity, without any evident difficulty. Although the tree itself was ceded to Spitfire as a part-time nest in the traditional foxy-poss manner, and Sherry seemed to be based further downstream, she obviously retained her standing in regard to the rest of her domain, and showed no sign of abnormal distress

or impediment. In other words, she lived a perfectly normal life.[ee]

Even more amazingly, `Honey' turned up some months later, with a fine, well-developed baby on her back.

The moral of the story is: never give up on a foxy-poss until you bury her - and then it was probably a case of mistaken identity.

`MIRI' About this time there suddenly appeared a young female who bore a striking resemblance to what I would have predicted Miri would look like by this time, but whether or not she was Miri was impossible to say. There were pros and cons. On the one hand there was a slight difference in colouration, but a possum's colour quite often does change slightly at puberty - Snoopy's changed dramatically. There was no sign of the L-shaped nick, but that had been an injury which might, indeed, have healed completely, with the scar disappearing, in time. She seemed to recognise the name `Miri', but this may have been no more than a response to my `recognition' of her. She also seemed to have an affinity for the house where I strongly suspected Miri had gone, and a tendency to go down across the road towards the nearest poplars in the vicinity. But she took up residence under the eaves and it became apparent that she was well advanced in pregnancy - if she was Miri, she would have had her first baby on her back by the time she was nine or ten months old. Early maturity is not unprecedented - for example Twiddy had Battered Baby before she was a year old, and, as perhaps in a later case, Juni, the enforced precocious emotional development may somehow have triggered off an early sexual development. Possums when young have a great knack for adapting to existing conditions, even in ways that might be genuinely impossible in other animals. But then to add to the confusion, after `Miri' had moved in round the corner from `Pumpkin', an older Miri look-alike, with an even more advanced baby, temporarily took up residence in an adjacent compartment under the eaves. In other words, there was indeed a family of Miri look-alikes, if not Miri's original family, somewhere close by.

**`PUMPKIN'** `Pumpkin' was a very nice, placid, affectionate, good-natured old girl, but, well, slow. Not actually unintelligent, but it seemed to take her a long, long time to get there. You often see the others standing looking at something, trying to work something out, how to get in or out, whether it's likely to be nice to eat, what's in it for them. You can almost see the mind going tick-tick-tick. But with `Pumpkin' the wheels seemed to turn at a rate of about one tick per hour. She got there - eventually.

She was having a bad time that winter, 1976. She had about three quarters of the surface of her eyes covered by cataracts, and seemed the possum equivalent of rheumaticky. To boot, she now had to contend with the aggressive, imperialistic young `Miri', who, whoever she was, had the same basic characteristics as the original.

It finally dawned on her what had long been obvious to the others - open eaves on top of a stone wall are no fit place for an elderly lady to live. Also, months afterwards, she realised what any other possum accustomed to tracking her brats to the top of my wardrobe would have realised in a few days - a perfectly good nest was available there, vacant possession. Even her great goofy son Elephant found it first.

She proceeded to move in on me, High Birnam Wood and all, and in due course, at the end of November or the beginning of December, 1976, presented me with a Christmas present in the form of a monstrous baby girl.

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ee. I last saw Sherry, pregnant, in 1984, when she would have been ten or eleven. Even her outer fur gradually regrew.

I was rather taken aback at first - despite my previous experience, there was something staggering about a non-hand-reared possum taking up residence on a wardrobe.

But when I came to think about it, it was not as unreasonable as it seemed. From `Pumpkin''s point of view it was obviously an excellent idea: a good warm protected place, with a choice of sleeping positions - I'd put a possum box up there when `Honey' was in residence, and `Pumpkin' alternated between this and the other confined spaces behind a pile of suitcases in the farthest corner, and so forth. And there was an added special perk. Knowing how much pleasure possums get from some of the food scraps which would normally be thrown away, apple cores and like, we usually tended to present them to the nearest available possum, for example Honeybunch when she was in residence in her box. `Pumpkin', probably at the time the most needy, was now also the nearest available possum, and the automatic recipient. Her new home had some disadvantages, lights and noisy humans, but those were things she had never found particularly objectionable. She was always among the most tolerant of lights, perhaps because of her eye troubles, and similarly didn't seem to worry about noisy humans creating a disturbance while she was asleep, as her previous choice of residence showed. She was nearly as high off the ground as she had been under the eaves - in fact only 18" or so below the ceiling, on the other side of which possums were not disinclined to be, so from that point of view there was no qualitative change. All in all a perfectly splendid idea.

From my point of view I was hard put to find a valid objection. Possums are very clean animals, insofar as their persons are concerned, and usually fairly fastidious about the state of their actual nest. `Pumpkin' was always a particularly clean possum, and cataracts and rheumatics aside, obviously healthy. The only mess she made in the part of the room I was concerned with was the occasional bunch of dried, rejected leaves. For I must explain about that wardrobe: it was an early experimental attempt at a built-in wardrobe, with casement, not sliding, doors and something of a mistake. The length proved too great to be spanned by a rail to hang clothes on, and in the end we had to put a smaller wardrobe inside it, the net result being the wastage of precious space in a 10' by 12' room. The top, similarly, is virtually unusable: it is too deep for me to reach the back of it standing on a chair in front of the wardrobe, but, being made of masonite, too flimsy for me to climb on it myself. The only thing I could ever do with it was to pile empty suitcases along the front edge. I can't do anything with most of the top of the wardrobe myself, because I can't even get to it. That being the case, there is no real reason why I should concern myself with it, unless something venomous or infectious moves in. If `Pumpkin' wanted it, why not?

For the most part, however, I didn't think at all. I just sat there and goggled as whole forests marched majestically up the branch before my very eyes.

In fact `Pumpkin' turned out to be less disruptive when living on the wardrobe than under the eaves. And, paradoxically, after her abortive scheme to enrol me as a baby-sitter, described below, I saw less of her daughter Chrissie, who was born there, than I did of the other babies who lived outside. Chrissie slept during the day, for the most part invisible unless I made a particular effort to see her, coming out only for her dinner. She went out at dusk, first with her mother, then later alone, returned fairly early, somewhere between 11 and about 1 a.m., then, though she occasionally made exploratory expeditions round the room if the lights were out, she usually went straight to bed. The other babies, however, got into the habit of spending a considerable part of the evening hanging around

the window, or just inside, in the adjacent part of the room, particularly if they were in trouble, or out of sorts with their mothers. Their mothers had apparently also decided that if and when they were going to be left alone, that was probably the safest place.

While `Pumpkin''s health was declining that winter, Jenny's, perhaps because of the respite from having babies, had been improving - fatally so. We had more or less expected that the previous winter, 1975, would be her last, but instead she picked up remarkably, to the extent that, against all expectations, it was obvious by midwinter 1976 that Jenny had done it again. She was not travelling alone. There was a passenger in her pouch.

SPRING 1976 BABY BOOM

There was a real baby boom that spring. `Miri' had a son, Timmy, under the eaves. As I said, when giving an official age to a baby possum one has to take the date of its first public appearance as its `birthday'. Everyone knows this can vary greatly in terms of the actual age of the baby, since some are out of the pouch when they are less mature than others still in the pouch, and their first appearances are in any case so brief they can easily be missed; nevertheless, it is usually the only way of introducing any consistency into the records, of giving at least some basis for comparison. But every baby for which I have either visual or auditory evidence in the nest has been out of the pouch there during its mother's quiescent periods, at first for short periods, then all the time, for approximately four weeks before it made its first appearance outside. We knew all about Timmy through the whole of July. In order to bring him into line with the rest, it is necessary to make some sort of guestimate, rather than estimate, of his official birthday - August at the very latest.

The rest turned up at more or less regulation times: in October Sherry had Blanche and Jenny had Jenny Junior; in November Baby had Midge, Dido had Clumsy, Twiddy had Sleepy and Spitfire had Dixie. The older possum under the eaves who looked like `Miri' also had a baby, but moved out before it was, theoretically, out of the pouch - I saw them briefly later. That made eight in all, with one more to come, `Pumpkin''s baby which, because she had once again given birth to a giant, distended her pouch to the point where it seemed to be about to come out long before it did. It was coming, and so was Christmas, and at one stage I began to think they would both arrive at about the same time. The baby was doomed to be labelled Christmas, with that execrable diminutive Chrissie as the operative name, even before it, or rather she, was out of the pouch in the nest. Naturally I had some idea of what was living on my wardrobe long before her official birthday, which, again a guestimate, was the end of November or beginning of December.

I had a nasty feeling that with nine babies not all would survive.

In the meantime this miniaturized frenetic horde provided a demonstration of just how small a part looks play in recognition. Battered Baby would have been very like her mother Twiddy had it not been for her early misfortunes, but as it was, she was one of the most visually distinctive possums in the pack. She and Twiddy had very similar female babies - and for some time those two babies regularly went to the wrong mother, Midge to Twiddy, Sleepy to Baby, although they didn't seem to make the same mistake with unrelated mothers. Mother and daughter, who initially share identical feeding patterns as well as genes, may well be somewhat similar in smell to a possum's nose. If visual recognition played any real part Midge simply could not have taken any other possum for her mother, nor could Sleepy have ever taken Battered Baby for Twiddy. At first the two mothers rebuffed the wrong babies when this happened, but eventually even

they apparently became totally bemused, and cordially greeted whichever baby toddled up to them.

Midge, unfortunately, was the inevitable casualty. Baby had the same `treat-'em-rough' philosophy about babies as her foxy-poss ancestors, and Midge, left alone, got into the habit of finding her way to my room and spending a considerable amount of time there. She was almost a caricature of possum character: very gentle and affectionate with humans, she seemed to like petting, and if I didn't have anything to give her when she arrived I could even pick her up and carry her with me into the lighted kitchen to get it, without protest; she was, however, extremely aggressive towards Other Possums, decidedly a pugnacious little soul. One wonders whether perhaps there is a `little (female) possum complex', like the `little man' complex. Despite her diminutive size, she was the most robust and self-sufficient of all the babies, and seemed a certain survivor. But she was the drop-out, killed apparently by a car, in her first mating season. There is no prevention against that.

There was no problem naming one member of the baby-boom. Jenny's baby was a girl, as beautiful in her own way as Jenny herself had been when she was young. Given that all were grey possums, Jenny, like Snoopy, was a brunette, and the original Pumpkin the ash-blond of the family - but this was a honey-blond. The complete little glamour poss, with the culmination of her beauty, if hardly her crowning glory, a magnificent, thick, cascading tail. Most babies have thin, rat-like affairs appended to them when they first come out - like puppies' tails they fluff out only later - but this one wouldn't have disgraced a youngster of three or four months old. Alas, that tail met with disaster. After she had been out for a few days she turned up with an open wound in the tip, a gaping chasm in proportion to the size of the tip,[xl] and though it didn't appear to give her much pain, it refused to heal.

When baby possums first come out of the pouch they are usually completely overawed by the enormity of the world, crouched down as low as possible against their mothers' backs, turning their heads, eyes unfocussed, from side to side in apprehension at every sound, or just burying themselves in their mothers' fur. Not this little lady. On her second night out Jenny was sitting on tree eating her handout, watchful as ever, her eyes and ear following, and identifying, any suspicious sound nearby. And the baby was copying her movements, looking, with ears pricked, towards whatever Jenny was giving her attention, obviously trying to identify and learn.

She had to be Jenny Junior. She was different in looks, but very, very similar in mentality. I decided that her actual name would be Juni, a concession to the inevitable. Like her predecessors she was bound to start answering to `Jenny', and the sound of `Juni' is so similar as to make virtually no difference. I knew in my bones that there wouldn't be confusion between the two for long.

JENNY

It was obvious that she was too much for Jenny. I helped as much as I could with extra food and baby-sitting, but Juni was another chauvinist like Miri, and would stay with me for only at most half an hour before throwing a tantrum that would bring Jenny back. To make matters worse, Twiddy had taken to persecuting Jenny. It was evident that Jenny was failing.

She started to go only short distances from the house. The persecutions continued, and matters got worse as Juni grew and ventured further away from Jenny, creating a separate target. On one occasion Juni was under attack high up in a casuarina. Jenny started up the long straight trunk to help her but fell back. I supported her, panting, on my shoulder, unable to go to the aid of her baby. Juni had to escape herself, at the

cost of some minor damage.

One night early in December 1976, when Juni was not much more than six weeks out of the pouch, she turned up in my room alone. I captured her, thinking that Jenny would be along to collect her later, but there was no sign of Jenny. I looked, of course, but there was no sign of Jenny ever again.

Jenny was the archetypal possum, if that archetype is deemed to include idiosyncrasies. I had a deep and lasting respect and affection for her, which I knew to be more or less one-sided. She never, to my knowledge, had any truck with the possum/non-possum bond. The participants in that relationship must, in some sense, be maladjusted individuals - they find the relationships open to them within their own species somehow inadequate, and so form relationships outside it. Jenny was one of the most well-adjusted individuals I have ever met. She may have bonded with one of the neighbours she visited, but I think not. I think she liked ups as well as she liked anybody but her own babies. It was us she brought her babies to, it was my shoulder she rested on, towards the end, when she found herself too weak to go up a tree to defend her cornered baby from Twiddy. I think she liked us as much as it was in her to like anyone.

Kipling's Cat was a possum called Jenny.

Sit tibi terra levis.

JENNY JUNIOR

Juni was Miri all over again, a motherless baby, too old be my baby, since it was too late for her to imprint on to me, and too young to be nobody's baby, and she started to behave like a miniature adult. It wasn't quite as bad as with Miri, because I had learned from hard experience how limited my help must be, and Juni herself was older and more capable. But the pattern was very similar.

For the first couple of days I shut her in my room, and took the opportunity to take her to the vet about her tail, something I obviously couldn't do while she was still with Jenny. There wasn't much which could be done about it, other than keeping it free from infection and hoping it would heal of its own accord. I came back with a bottle of something which, in my ignorance, I compared to glorified Gentian Violet.

Juni was quite amenable to my painting her tail with it every night: the performance probably had a false, but acceptable possum meaning, for reasons I'll explain.

One of the things which wasn't helping Juni was mosquitoes. They plague possums anyway, settling on any unfurred areas they can find, usually the tip or underside of the tail. Of course they swarmed to an open wound, with the result that it was in a constant state of irritation; the vet very ingeniously put a couple of drops of citronella in bottle to counteract this - which it did. But this meant that the nightly daub smelt very strongly of citronella. Now at that time of year I, too, wear insect repellent whenever I go outside, and furthermore it is in the nature of things that at least some of the violent purple concoction I set out to put on Juni's tail ended up on me, so that I also smelt heavily of citronella.

It is quite possible that she thought that the nightly anointment was my way of scent-marking her, ensuring that she smelt of my smell, to show that she was mine. And by this time she herself knew that this, as it were, was better than nothing.

For she was too old not to know what had happened to her. There was nothing I could even try to do to console her for the loss of Jenny.

After a couple of days she plain refused to stay in, and moved back into Jenny's nest in the corner of the kitchen ceiling. In the evening she followed the shorter nightly run Jenny had used in the last weeks, a

route which took her no more than fifty feet from the house.

At first I'd wait for Juni to come out at sunset, and see her safely into the trees. I'd stay with her, and when I thought she'd been out long enough I'd catch her, partially by guile and partially, I suspect, with her co-operation. She never came down on to my shoulder, as those babies who were imprinted on me did, but she put herself in a position where she could be caught, and remained within reach even after dodging a couple of futile grabs which left me holding thin air. Once I had her I carried her, biting and struggling all the way, back in through the window, fed her, doctored her tail, and put her to bed on the top shelf of the bookcase - the only place in my room where she would consent to settle down, the wardrobe, at that time, being occupied by `Pumpkin' and Chrissie. She would sleep for an hour or so, and when she woke up I'd go out with her and watch over her in the trees, escorting her back to her nest at bedtime.

However, it is much safer for a baby to out alone at Newport than it is at Ingleside, and Juni was in any case much older than Miri had been. After this had been going on for a few days, and it was evident that she was quite competent once up a tree, I started leaving her safely parked in the early evening and going out later to catch her and bring her in for her dinner. This new routine had been in force for only a couple of nights when I inadvertently ran a little bit late going out to catch her; she appeared on the window sill of her own accord, waiting to be caught. After that she came herself.

Like Miri, she was a premature adult. She hardly ever played. While the other babies were outside playing wildly, turning gleeful somersaults under the fond, proud eyes of their mothers, running back every so often to be licked and cuddled and congratulated, to be suckled or to share their mothers' food, Juni spent a lot of time in the bookcase, sleeping or moping. She was inconsolable over Jenny's loss.

A very sad baby.

But gradually her attitude to me changed, just slightly, as Miri's had done. The whole thing became ritualized, and started to turn into a game. She would appear at the window, waiting to be caught. I would dutifully catch her, very slowly and gently picking her up and carrying her over to the bookcase. This, of course, is the supreme insult, and the law stated that I must be bitten, so I was duly bitten - the gentlest of love-bites, mouthing my finger with a caressing tongue. I would put her in the bookcase where her dinner was waiting, behind a curtain of dark material I'd thumb-tacked over the front to make it more congenial for her, and, accidentally-on-purpose, she would leave her tail dangling out for me to daub while she ate.

The Tale of a Tail

That tail is a tale in itself. The open wound simply wouldn't heal for months, then, just when I'd given up hope entirely, it started to mend. What seemed to be going on was something like this. As I said, baby possums grow in fits and starts, one part of their anatomy at a time, unevenly. For example, their ears might grow to a size disproportionate to the rest of the possum, then nothing else at all happens to them until the rest of the possum has more or less caught up, each part in turn. Quite often the feature prominent when you would normally first see a baby remains prominent in the adult possum, but the disparity is at least reduced before the more developed feature starts to grow again. There is probably a common enough order of development for there to be a norm, but the order is certainly not rigidly fixed. Joey had a full coat before his teeth were expressed, something I've never noticed in any of the others; with Snoopy, apart from pathological symptoms, it was the ears that were over-developed, as with Miri - this seems to be one of the commonest sequences. With Juni,

it was her tail. Her tail was months older than the rest of her when she came out of the pouch, and nothing could be done to it, in regard to either growth or healing, until the rest more or less caught up.[xli]

When this happened, it healed, but it didn't grow very much, which seems to make sense. It healed in a rather singular manner. Her tail-tip, like her mother's was originally dark-skinned, but the wound healed over with lightish skin, a white dot in the surrounding black. Then hairs started to sprout on it, white hairs, so that there was no real tail-tip any more.

She started life with a glorious tail, but at this stage she had the most unaesthetic excuse for one. She had a very mild dose of the fur-loss blight, which resulted in the loss of a little surface hair from her rump, above the tail, and more on the upper part of the tail itself. Truncated, tipless, thin at the top and bushy at the bottom, her tail certainly justified the `brush-tail possum' appellation. It strongly resembled a brush - a lavatory brush.

It was a couple of years later before she started to develop a new tail tip, beyond the point where her original tip was located, still marked by a sprinkling of white hairs. It was at first no more than a pocket of loose, wrinkled, darkish skin, but eventually she managed to grow a tail that didn't detract from her beauty, even if it was never the superb cascade it had started out to be.

But there was another twist. Ironically, her first baby, a boy named Brandy, also had a white tail-tip. Like those which had appeared previously in the Foxy family group and in `Pumpkin''s Elephant, it took the form of light coloured skin on the naked tip, with the adjacent hairs also white instead of the normal black. While by no means in the same class as Elephant's magnificent inch-and-a-half of pure white, Brandy's tip was distinctive enough to mark him out, and, purely by coincidence, augmented the already noticeable resemblance between mother and son. But she, like the chief captain of Acts 22.27-8, paid dearly for her distinction, while he, like St. Paul, was born to his.

In the meantime Juni had gradually stopped biting me, and seemed to be developing a Jenny-type fondness for me, not a bond, in the true sense, or even a particular liking for my company, but a preference for it rather than loneliness or that of anyone else. But Jenny Junior was indeed Jenny, Junior, and shortly thereafter went into her combination adolescent early-pregnancy biting phase, when my physical proximity would, without warning for either of us, trigger off a biting reflex, just like Snoopy and Kylie. Allowing for the fact that she was a healthy baby in a Miri-type situation, her psychological development was in fact very like Snoopy's. In this case she even, like Snoopy, showed some ambivalence while biting. She didn't love me as her mother, so, unlike Snoopy, she didn't cry while she was doing it. But she would stop, horrified, apparently, by her lack of control over her own action afterwards - `Why did I do that?' Like me and Erik and hunting reflexes. And once, when I loudly berated her for nipping my finger, she ran and hid behind me for protection.

As with Snoopy, these episodes became more rare as her pregnancy progressed, though, to a greater extent than with Snoopy, there were still odd incidents even after Brandy was out of the pouch. But these, too, eventually ceased to occur, and later her temper, at least as far as I was concerned, matched her looks.

At that time there was an old caravan near Joey's old tree, with a hatch and flyscreen in the top, and some of the possums got the idea that it might be a good place to try for a hand-out. About two years after I first daubed purple stuff on the tail of a little blond fury, Juni missed

her hand-out in my room, but later located me in the caravan. I opened the flyscreen below the hatch to pass her a slice of bread, but she, in her eagerness, was apparently leaning on the flyscreen, and slithered down it, then down me on to the floor. She could easily have saved herself a five-foot fall by putting her claws into me and checking herself at any point - I'm sure any other possum in the group would have done so under such circumstances, and indeed `Miri' did a couple of times. Nor would I blame them for such a reflexive action. But Juni did not do so - at one point she seemed to start to grab me, but stopped herself, and went whump! on the floor below, where she collected herself, politely accepted her slice of bread, and meekly trotted over to the door to be let out.

Serene beauty was her motif.

There was no Empty Nest reaction from the females after Jenny disappeared, perhaps because they had become used to seeing her infrequently during the period when she confined herself to the immediate vicinity of the house, perhaps because three wasn't actually an empty nest. Juni took it over. It may have been my imagination, but there did seem to be one possum apart from Juni who in some sense missed Jenny - her old consort, Big Pink Pig.

PIG AND `PUMPKIN'

Pig had been Jenny's regular attendant since Joe's departure. He was a dear old fellow, the epitome of a worldly-wise old male possum, easy-going, unruffled, happy to fall in with any reasonable request. (Not, of course, that he wasn't an old rogue - he would of course con me out of extra food whenever he could, but that, too, is part of the typical male possum.) If he lacked the panache of some of the others, Mephistopheles; sardonic sense of humour, Erik's rakish amiability or Joe's quicksilver cock-sparrow cleverness, he made up for it by sheer good nature. He was by no means unintelligent, and eminently touchable - not, I think, because he liked the physical sensation, since he didn't arch his body under my hand, or automatically respond with quick abortive dabs with tongue or nose, the baby response, as the other odd possum who seemed to like being petted had done. It seemed more a matter of emotional reassurance. After long years of experience with ignorant ill-mannered humans he had come to expect it, and it had become one more thing in the combination of things in a given circumstance which signified that all was normal, all was well. Pig, late at night, sitting on top of the bedcover with me underneath it by way of a chair base, with or without Smiley or Sheba sprawled a foot or so away, being stroked while he ate his bread, was Pig where Pig should be, by his lights.

After Jenny died he seemed rather lost for several weeks. Eventually he attached himself to the surviving senior female, `Pumpkin', in the same loose sort of way. Perhaps by that time he had forgotten she wasn't Jenny. I hope so.

He and `Pumpkin' were well suited. While she was a properly aggressive female and he was a properly complaisant male, beyond their sexual roles both were placid, phlegmatic, easy-going souls.

One night I witnessed a truly Dickensian instance of `dropping down'. `Pumpkin' dropped her substantial self on Pig from the height of the picture window, as he was happily munching a piece of bread. But she was careful to straddle him with all four paws, so that the impact was taken by her own legs. Pig looked up vaguely, `Eh? Oh, all right,' and meekly trotted out leaving his bread for `Pumpkin'. And a few minutes after she left was back for a replacement slice. It was a comfortable, old shoe sort of relationship, the nearest possums ever get to being married.

`Pumpkin''s easy-going tolerance was not confined to Pig. Later she was, of necessity, more bellicose: her 1978 autumn baby, a boy called

Marco, was literally partially eaten by something when a few days (formally) out of the pouch. Almost the entire left side of his torso had been taken in a single bite - mercifully the rib-cage protected the vital organs - and there were other large bites on his groin, again just missing the vital organs. There was a graze under his chin, and his entire facial fur was taken off, as if the attacker had had his head in its mouth when his mother finally arrived; she herself bore battle scars. Marco, possum-fashion, made an excellent recovery from what seemed like horrendous injuries, but the attack occurred at what should have been the time of maximum growth rate, and he couldn't both grow and heal at the same time; in a kind of reverse version of Juni, healing had to take priority, because the wounds were so serious, with the result that he was well behind normal development for his age, and so needed special, protracted treatment from his mother.

Even so, she did not alter her attitude to the world in general. While Marco was still convalescent there was a confrontation on top of my window. `Pumpkin', with Marco on her back, was sitting there eating, when Dido suddenly arrived, complete with her autumn baby on her back, a girl, theoretically the same age as Marco, but very much more advanced, to the point where she occasionally turned up in my room alone when Dido apparently left her behind in the roof. Dido took one look at `Pumpkin', who was prepared to fight in defence of her weak baby, and decamped, leaving her own little girl on the window, about six inches from `Pumpkin'. `Pumpkin' had dropped her bread between her front paws. The brat - Dido got 'em like herself - decided that she wanted it, and proceeded to squall and threaten, demanding that `Pumpkin' should get out of the way. When `Pumpkin' only stood there, looking perplexed, Toecutter calmly walked in between her front paws and started eating it. `Pumpkin' made a swift downward movement over young Toecutter's neck, seemingly a cross between striking and the intention to lick, but which was in any case checked short of the target. Toecutter merely swore and abused `Pumpkin' - her dinner was being interrupted. Eventually, `Pumpkin' clambered over her, like a mother cat climbing over her kittens in a box, and departed with Marco, leaving Toecutter in possession of the window - and the bread. A similar incident took place a few nights later, when Toecutter came to the window alone and `Pumpkin' subsequently arrived without her baby, whom she'd left in her nest.

`Pumpkin''s Ploy

`Pumpkin' was a very strange lady, even apart from High Birnam Wood. I had always sworn that she was simple, but...

`Pumpkin' was an inveterate baby-parker, and, apart from acquiescing in the presence of her straying offspring in my room during the period when she was living under the eaves, made at least one, perhaps more, attempts to inflict Elephant on me while she went off for the night. No doubt she got it from Jenny.

I suspected something of the sort was dimly in her mind when she moved in on me, and I wasn't particularly keen on the idea. At that time Jenny was in her last few weeks, obviously having difficulty coping with her baby, and I was having to give her a break of half an hour or so each night, until young Madam started to express her disapproval by biting me; it was evident that before too long I was going to have Juni on my hands more or less full time.

However, as I said before, `Pumpkin' on my wardrobe was at first less disruptive than `Pumpkin' living under the eaves. Then she seemed to be popping in and out of my room all night - perhaps, in retrospect, because she was establishing her proprietorial claims before moving in. Once she was safely installed on the wardrobe she went out at sunset, called in about mid-evening for a snack, then went off again until bed-time, and that was all I saw of her. She followed the same routine when at long last she

started taking Chrissie out on her back.

I think that it was about the third time she took Chrissie out that a variation occurred. As usual, she came in a couple of hours after she left, with Chrissie still on her back, got up on the index drawers, and calmly started to eat her food, giving the impression, with all her body signals, that she had settled down for the time being. Chrissie got off her back to sit beside her and share her food, in normal baby-possum manner. As previously, I gave Chrissie a separate little piece of her own, to mitigate the tendency of young babies to snatch adult size pieces from their mothers, only to find them too big to handle and drop them. While I was fussing over her, and her attention was on me, I noticed `Pumpkin' going up the window - Chrissie then noticed too, and became alarmed. I said, `Hey, you forgot something,' scooped up Chrissie and put her on `Pumpkin''s back. `Pumpkin' went off, clearly none too pleased.

Five minutes later she was back. She behaved exactly as if it were the first time she had come that evening, coming down to the top of the drawers and settling down to eat, once again showing every sign of staying for some time. Again Chrissie got off, again I started fussing over her - and out of the corner of my eye I saw `Pumpkin' silently oozing over the side of the index drawers and sliding out the window.

By the time I had covered the few feet to the window there wasn't a sign of a possum anywhere, not so much as a rustle, and I was left with a rather unwilling Chrissie.

That wretched animal planned that. She knew that if she gave any sign of her intentions both Chrissie and I would object. If it weren't a contradiction in terms I would say that the old brain must have been ticking over for months to devise that scheme. She planned that, damn her, several moves ahead, if only for a matter of a few minutes.

`Pumpkin' and Chrissie and nests

Chrissie was a monstrous baby. She was the size of a normal local yearling when she was six months old, and continued to grow. Ridiculously, this prodigious sprig long remained a baby mentally - a very, very big baby. Indeed she was too much of a baby to have much personality of her own - gentle, shy, timid, with occasional bursts of territorial aggression towards `intruders' in my room, insofar as it was possible to tell she was very like `Pumpkin'.

She showed no signs of leaving home; her mother took the first signs that she was growing up - objections to being washed, a hostile reception when `Pumpkin', a late possum, rejoined Chrissie, and early possum, in the nest - as an excuse to cede the wardrobe to her, moving back under the eaves and evicting `Miri'. Chrissie stayed put for a couple of months, and all seemed well, but then she moved out and rejoined her mother under the eaves. She was still `Pumpkin''s baby, according to her.

Her behaviour towards other possums matched. Anybody, even her contemporaries who were half her size, could intimidate her. Pig, with the size and experience of a very old male, and cultivated phlegmatism to match, occasionally experimented with standing up to the smaller juvenile females. Usually his bluff was called after a couple of incidents, but he had a whale of a time with this backward giantess.

On one occasion I tried to photograph the performance, Chrissie, initially large and fierce, trying to intimidate him, expecting him to back down in the prescribed manner, then gradually shrinking before my eyes, becoming more and more bewildered and frightened by this sudden reversal of the natural order, as he sedulously ignored her imprecations, or occasionally returned her vituperation in a casual, almost absent-minded way; she put an end to the proceedings by running to me for protection and explanation.

She was still with `Pumpkin' under the eaves, though now almost eighteen months old, having apparently lost her own first baby, when `Pumpkin''s new baby, Marco, mentioned above, was mauled. Whether she was directly involved or not I do not know, but a later incident made her a prime suspect.

As a matter of necessity I had to keep young Marco inside with me, out of the weather, for a lot of the time in the first couple of days after his injury, and `Pumpkin' took the opportunity to go on the rampage, clearing all the resident possums out of the vicinity of her nest. Chrissie seemed to take over `Miri''s box a couple of bays along from `Pumpkin' for a while, but one night arrived in the main feed group and proceeded to chase away every other possum within range, one after the other. Dido, the fiercest senior female, watched from the roof, appalled at this monstrous apparition, then prudently retreated to the other side of the house. It looked as if Chrissie, perhaps in early pregnancy, had finally grown up and realised how big she was, and all would now be well, at least for `Pumpkin' and young Marco, if not for anybody else.

But a couple of days later she was back under the eaves. When Marco fell, or was pushed out, and unable to get back until I found him, she moved back into the same compartment as her mother, `Pumpkin''s baby once again.

Not long after her return to Mother she was sitting on the window eating her hand-out when `Pumpkin' arrived with Marco on her back. Chrissie proceeded to harass Marco throughout their meal, snatching at him with her hands and striking at him, apparently jealous of his position in regard to `Pumpkin', and perhaps also of my attentions. Marco defended himself as well as he could, but `Pumpkin' made no move to intervene. Chrissie finally got a hold on him with her hands and suspended him in mid-air, the better to bite him. At that point I intervened, and removed him to a safe distance in order to give `Pumpkin' a clear field to deal with the situation.

Instead, `Pumpkin' went up to Chrissie, and, crouching down before her, looked up pleadingly in what appeared to be a gesture of appeasement; I have never seen a possum use that gesture, the nearest being a submissive youngster crouching in front of an adult. Apparently `Pumpkin' still regarded Chrissie as her baby whenever Chrissie chose to behave in an appropriate manner, and a situation where she had two babies simultaneously, and one attacked the other, left her in a state of irresolvable conflict; all she could do was to beg Chrissie, with a gesture similar to that of a baby begging food from its mother, to behave like a reasonable possum.

Eventually `Pumpkin' decided to leave - it was all too much for her - but Chrissie attacked her departing rump on a reflex action. That broke the spell; `Pumpkin' returned and quelled her. Chrissie remained, subdued, until `Pumpkin' finished her food and departed, with Marco scrambling after her. Chrissie was not permitted to leave until they had a good head start.

But Chrissie was also `Pumpkin''s baby in less unpleasant ways. After I first wrote this I went out one night about bed-time, and nearly tripped over her, diligently hauling a bundle of leaves entwined in her tail.

So now there were two of them.[ff]

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ff. Since writing this I have seen very many more females following this practice, if not with quite the same avocation; it seems likely that it is the rule rather than the exception, and only Jenny's direct line seem to abstain. Indeed, I have even known a case of a male camped in a fresh leaf-lined nest, though possibly this was a matter of taking over someone else's very temporary abode, benefitting from someone

**`MIRI'** Poor `Miri' had a disaster in the second half of summer 1977. She disappeared for three days, then turned up, extremely emaciated, dragging herself along by her front paws. I couldn't be sure whether this was due to illness, or whether she had been hit by a car - both were possible, since a sick possum wandering around in a stupor is all the more likely to do something silly on the road. Certainly, what followed looked like the locally endemic Blight.

I couldn't keep her in the house overnight in order to take her to the vet, even on the first night. Typically, either she got out somehow, or she had hysterics, not the sort of hysterics which abate in a couple of hours, but hysterics which got worse and worse the longer I kept her in, with her heart racing faster and faster all the time, as she struggled frantically to demolish the window, alternating this with begging gestures towards me. It always ended with my relenting, afraid, literally, for her life. I could only have risked keeping her in to take her to the vet once, when she wouldn't be coming back anyway. That `once' very nearly happened on several occasions, but I never quite reached the final decision.

This was probably fortunate, because she very slowly started to improve, a matter of two steps forward, one step back, and within that pattern first one back leg would give up entirely, then the other, as if compensating for the first had overstrained it. The left leg was worse in any case, so when it was its `turn' to go matters were not too bad - she simply carried it - but there was real trouble when the right malfunctioned. And, of course, occasionally both legs wore out at the same time. But still, there seemed to be overall progress.

Adjustment to the situation Part of the reason for the improvement was that she acquired an auxiliary form of locomotion - me. She used my legs as spares, on a kind of guide dog analogy. At first she hauled herself in my window at night, and insisted on going back out, to drag herself over the ground to the eaves. After a couple of nights of this I couldn't stand it any longer so, when she had finished eating, I picked her up by the tail and carted her back to the eaves myself. She struggled violently the first time, less the second, then decided, when it was apparent that I was only taking her home that it was an excellent idea. She would clamber up on my shoulder as soon as she had finished eating, ready to be carted home. Thereafter, she would go out at sunset in, comparatively speaking, mobile condition, and when she wore out scramble in my window, eat her dinner and - catch a taxi home.

Once that was established she also started using the taxi around her trees, only a little off-route at first, guiding the direction by displaying interest and eagerness, or alternatively indifference or aversion. There was no doubt about who was the pet-owner and who was the pet; she could exercise some control over my actions, but I had none whatever over hers.

She was gradually improving when, not surprisingly, `Pumpkin' turned the tables on her, leaving the wardrobe to Chrissie and moving back under the eaves, evicting `Miri' in her turn. I was not a party to the events, but found a *fait accompli* - `Pumpkin' was there and `Miri' wasn't, though she turned up in my room at night. I suspected where `Miri' would take refuge, the same house the original Miri headed for, but there was nothing I could do. I just took her, as she `directed' me by gestures and body signals, to the fence-line, and despite her eloquent silent requests no further. At first I left her in a lantana patch, where the interlocking branches meant she couldn't fall, as from a normal tree. Unfortunately the

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else's work.

patch thinned out beyond this point, so she couldn't use it to go where she was going. I tried everything I could think of to persuade her to stay in my room, but, apart from a wistful glance at what was now Chrissie's wardrobe, she showed no inclination to do so. She was not Snoopy, and my weird ethics say I can help one possum, but not to the detriment of another, so there was no more I could do. If I tried to insist she stay elsewhere in the room, there were hysterics again, tearing at the window, heart racing faster and faster, interspersed with begging gestures towards me and scrambling up on to my shoulder as she did each night when she'd finished her dinner and was ready for bed, to try to induce me to follow the normal pattern and take her home.

Then she had a sudden complete relapse: all at once she was almost back where she started. She nearly went to the vet that time. It was not the fact that she had relapsed that was so alarming - there had been minor relapses all along within the overall framework of improvement - but the severity of the relapse, and above all its inexplicability. If there had been some visible external cause, which meant that it wouldn't be a recurrent thing, I wouldn't have worried so much. But if, as it seemed, she was going to do this of her own accord, matters couldn't be allowed to go on.

It was just as well that I took the coward's path once more, because the cause became apparent a few weeks later. And she started to recover again, more rapidly this time.

And then it seemed as if matters had been taken out of my hands - I found her dead on the road.

That is to say, I found an identical female possum dead on the road outside the house she inevitably headed for. Mature female possums are less likely road casualties than males: they have to be dislocated from their territories and routes by something - wandering about in a fever, or being chased by a stronger possum when they themselves are unwell - since a possum whose established nightly routes cross a fairly busy road doesn't usually live to maturity. It all fitted only too well. I buried her, or, to put it crudely, I buried as much as I could, since the body was somewhat mangled, but I was in no doubt as to the identity. The only unfamiliar thing about this possum I carried on my shoulder every night was a kink in the tail, which somehow nagged at me.

That night I was working at my desk, feeling rather low because it was the time when `Miri' should show up for dinner, when the corpse walked in the window. It was only after I'd calmed down that I realised the significance of the kink in the tail. The casualty had been one of the foxy-possums whom I rarely saw, who had carried that injury since babyhood, well out of her territory and probably running blind in a mating season altercation.

After that `Miri''s fortunes really did improve. One night I was carrying her around the trees near which she now seemed to be camping, near the house she was headed for - it was the area where I used to meet Mrs. Poss - and stopping at likely looking vegetation to let her nibble from a reasonable range of food. She suddenly made a great discovery. Adjacent to one of her favourite bushes was a kind of pyramid, formed by meulenbeckia covering two small casuarina saplings. Her whole body suddenly said, `Wow!' She dived off my shoulder and burrowed into the depths of the matted substructure. I waited, but no possum came out.

I wasn't entirely sure that this meant what I thought it meant, but a couple of days later, someone came in during daylight and pronounced that there was a possum visible in the meulenbeckia.

With this as her main nest, she proceeded to establish a

territory, which was a kind of miniature of Snoopy's first territory at Ingleside. The nest in the meulenbeckia was at first somewhat separated from the rest, which comprised Mrs. Poss' old trees, including one large tree from which even `Pumpkin' departed when `Miri' arrived, and some adjacent smaller ones. This area was connected to the meulenbeckia only by a narrow band of vegetation, about 5 ft. wide and 60 ft. long, or by the adjacent path - she walked home, or drove her human, according to the variable condition of her back legs. It now formed a rough rectangle, corresponding to a large part of a terrace in the plant nursery, the `natural' topography from a possum's point of view.

In due course an alternative nest at the other end of this run, in the form of a possum box in her main tree, somehow eventuated. By this time I had learnt my lesson well enough to sedulously ignore this mysterious apparition in her presence, ostentatiously assuming it to be something unimportant that just happened to have grown there. It just sat there, looking silly, for about two weeks, and then she herself drew my attention to the splendid new nest she had found for herself.[gg]

Her health was gradually improving, in the usual two-steps-forward-one-step-back manner. As she continued to improve physically she started to make a great show of dangling by her back legs when I was there, just to prove she could. A couple of months previously there seemed no hope at all that she would ever be able to do this again Her back legs were never 100% again, but with or without back legs `Miri' was a force to be reckoned with. She set about expanding and rationalising her territory by including a bush-house adjacent to the meulenbeckia, previously the preserve of her Foxy-Jenny cross female neighbour, `Moto' (plausibly, but not quite certainly, the original Moto cf. above, Note xiii).

Then came a second inexplicable major relapse. Again she nearly made her first and last trip to the vet, again, thank heavens, I took the coward's path, for this time the explanation became clear within a few days, and with it a retrospective explanation for the previous relapse. There was now something in `Miri''s pouch, something that hadn't been there a couple of nights before. I kept checking, in case it was some form of malignancy, but it kept shifting from one side of the pouch to the other, and it was shaped remarkably like a baby possum. So now there were one-and-a-half possums, not one, in the meulenbeckia.

At least it shed some light on the relapses: the first would have occurred after the strain of a torrid mating, the second after the actual birth of the baby; while this tends to be a non-event with a healthy possum, it can cause some even relatively fit animals to be `off colour' for a few days, and for `Miri' in her state could well have been a genuine ordeal.

At around this time I made the discovery that there were not one-and-a-half, but two-and-a-half possums in the meulenbeckia. Timmy, the first young male to yield to the pressure of the clearance of surrounding land and make only a token juvenile departure, and had then taken up a sort of 3-day routine with on and off appearances, not unlike Erik's (see above, pp.9-10), was now, apparently, camping in the meulenbeckia when he was with us. He'd gone back to bludge on his poor old invalid mum. Strange things happened in that meulenbeckia during the day, with the surface all a-quiver. I do not wish to speculate.

`Miri''s attitude to me had changed somewhat. There wasn't exactly a bond as such, but the ingredients were there. I started as being

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gg. After `Miri' it was at one stage occupied by a ring-tail, who built a leaf nest inside.

her spare pair of legs; naturally she was fond of them, as she was of her own. Then I became her trained human: she had me trained to bring her food at given times suitable to her convenience - once I knew where she was living I took her breakfast out to her - and to be ridden around her estate, the direction guided by leaning towards where she wanted to go, showing interest in something particular, or conversely sitting still and indifferent if I went the wrong way, just as with Snoopy and Joey. Naturally, too, she was jealous of her pet, particularly if `Moto' tried to take my attention from her.

But then another enigma emerged. She started getting up in broad daylight, around 3.30 or 4 p.m. (4.30-5 Daylight Saving Time). At first there seemed no sane explanation: earlier in her convalescence it might have been to avoid other possums, or, because her disability slowed her travelling rate, to get to the other end of her territory before they did, but it occurred when she had improved to the point of moving over known routes only marginally more slowly than the others, and when she was actually expanding her territory, with all giving way before her. Nor was it because I fed her early - she in fact missed out on breakfast for the first week, until I realised what was happening, because she had already gone off for the night by the time I arrived at her nest. First a claustrophobic possum, then a heliotropic possum, I thought. By the same token, she appeared able to see as well as I could in daylight. On one occasion she spotted a suspect cat on the ground about thirty feet away, and continued to follow its motions for some time. If she wasn't using her sight, she had some other sense so finely tuned as to be tantamount to same.

Just about the time when the baby should have been coming out of the pouch in the nest, she started to insist on sleeping in a band of dense vegetation on the opposite side of her territory from the meulenbeckia, where I couldn't go, probably for that reason. But mercifully she got over that, and went back to alternating between the meulenbeckia at one end of the now 100 ft. territory and the box at the other.

Baby Boom and Returnees

`Miri''s baby was part of another veritable baby boom in spring 1977, which, with the return of a couple of juveniles who had seemingly departed, amounted to a temporary population explosion.

`Elephant' - the inverted commas are hardly necessary, since the magnificent inch-and-a-half white tip was unmistakable, and about the only other possibility would have been his unknown father, if that father happened to be very young indeed - `Elephant' was now a huge, magnificent young male, whom I'd spotted occasionally up the creek. He returned in all his glory, and had a considerable impact on the population later, at the house and especially up the creek, where he continued to range. A sadder return was that of Dixie, Spitfire's baby girl of spring 1976, with her characteristic striped face marking; she had not disappeared for such lengthy periods, and there was no real doubt as to her identity. She turned up with an appalling case of the Blight, so bad that I took her to the vet. This time the diagnosis was pancreatic failure. Dixie didn't make it, but she offered a solution to the mystery of the foxy-possums and their apparent congenital susceptibility, and concomitant resistance to, this wretched ailment. If there were congenital pancreatic weakness in the line affecting the digestion - and the family habit of eating very slowly, chewing every mouthful interminably is consistent with this - then this could tend to aggravate any vitamin deficiency problem caused by the limited range of diet in their area.

As for the babies, there were so many that my imagination was soon destitute of names. I decided to name them after the first named star I saw after they came out, then shorten it to something operative, with

embarrassing results, since the obvious diminutive tended to turn out to be inappropriate to the sex of the baby when I later discovered it. `Pumpkin' lost her spring baby, a female, before it was properly out of the pouch, on the 11th September, but the next night Dido produced Antares, who had to be Tari, rather than something more obvious, like Andy, because she turned out to be a girl. Then on the 16th Spitfire was accompanied by Achernar, Achro, who also turned out to be a girl, rather like her mother in temperament, despite the masculine name-ending. On the 19th Juni had her little boy, Aldeberan, out; his ginger colouring inevitably made him Brandy. Battered Baby's little girl, who appeared on the 20th, should have been Betelgeuse, but she was so fair that the proximity to Brandy made me break my rule and call her Soda. On the 1st October Sherry had Spica, another little girl, and finally, on the 18th, a perfect little baby, whom `Miri' had left in the meulenbeckia while she came out for early dinner at about 4.15 p.m., followed her out and dived into her pouch. I named it Castor, but then found it was a girl, so she had to be Cassie.

Juni's baby, Brandy, was a splendid little fellow, with a small white tip on the end of his tail - Elephant, where were you? Like other young ladies and gentlemen of my acquaintance, he was somewhat contumelious: he made premature gestures towards independence whenever he got in a huff with his mother. Unfortunately for him, there was one such episode when he was about four weeks old. Juni, having been orphaned herself at 4-6 weeks old, apparently thought that that was the end of her duties; poor Brandy `went out into the garden to eat worms' and when he came back, the door was shut. He started moping around my room, a very sad little baby like his mother, and at one stage was pathetically trailing after Dido and her baby Tari, at a respectful distance, apparently hoping to attach himself to them; Di had been wont to bully him whenever she caught up with him, but now had become ill, and treated him more mildly; he didn't, however, manage to get himself adopted. I was very sorry for Brandy, particularly when I was watching the affection and care lavished on the other babies by their mothers, above all with `Miri''s Cassie, but also, in particular, with Sherry's Spica. On one occasion I saw Sherry actually feed Spica, popping a morsel into the importunate little mouth.[xlii]

But it was `Miri' who was the real pedagogue.

Her baby Cassie was a perfect, robust little girl, for what it is worth, the image of the original Miri.[hh] Even for a possum, `Miri' was the most devoted of mothers. While most babies seem to learn by osmosis, as it were, accompanying their mothers and copying their actions, `Miri' seemed to be actually teaching Cassie, quelling her with a severe look whenever she got out of line, taking my finger instead of the food, or starting to come towards `Miri' when she had been parked in a particular position. Within a week `Miri' had her trotting at her heels with well-nigh military precision. At the same time, every muscle in her body radiated pride and affection. She was bursting with pride in that baby, as well she might be, and her whole world revolved around Cassie.

Then suddenly everything turned upside down. Cassie was killed, tragically, by a head wound, probably caused by a car, when she was about twenty days out of the pouch. A few nights later Brandy had managed to acquire a highly unorthodox `uncle' - the tomcat Smiley.

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hh. Which is only natural, considering that the adult `Miri', whoever she was, was physically precisely what that baby would have grown into. Furthermore, another factor in Timmy's reluctance to leave home may have been the fact that he seemed to have something of an Oedipus complex, and his mother seemed to return his affections; he was physically nearly identical to `Miri' and could well have been Cassie's father.

`Miri' was completely lost for a couple of days. For nearly a year, something had been absorbing her full attention the whole of the time, first her laborious convalescence, then Cassie. Now, suddenly, when she was in comparative good health, there was nothing. She just stayed in her nest and refused to do anything for the next few days, while the others wandered in and out of her hard won territory at will. `Moto', and even the current lowest of the low, Brandy, intruded even to the meulenbeckia, with impunity.

Then she began to rouse herself, and chased them out; `Moto' seemed determined to provide her with continuing motivation by impudent intrusions, though she ran whenever `Miri' got near.[xliii] The respite from carrying the baby seemed to do her good, physically, and I started to suspect there might be a replacement for Cassie in autumn.

But then there was a recurrence of her old illness, which incapacitated her again. She remained fiercely independent, although her territory had been eroded back to the meulenbeckia itself, and she was suffering incursions even there. The end came when she fell out during the day and was unable to climb back; a dog caught her as she desperately clung to a pot plant. Fortunately the dog was one of those amiable idiots one seems to find among the hounds, a kind of canine Dido, as close as one actually gets in reality to the stereotype prisoner of the moment - if you told him to stop doing something, he obediently stopped, and, having fulfilled his duty, started again a minute or so later. He seemed to take `Miri' for one of the stuffed toy animals he was wont to play with, worrying at them till he pulled them to pieces and disembowelled them, but not, even in play, `killing' them in the first instance. `Miri' suffered no more than the loss of a couple of mouthfuls of fur before the process was interrupted.

I took her inside and put her on the wardrobe, and this time she stayed. Even she seemed to realise that she couldn't stay outside if she was going to fall out of her nest and be unable to climb back. This time her recovery was more rapid; instead of stubbornly wearing herself to the point of exhaustion each night by trying to carry out all her normal possum activities, she consented to stay put and rest, and be fed, on leaves and human food, by me.

In fact she stayed up there so long, nearly six weeks, even after she was in a better state of health by far than when she first started to scramble around the trees and establish a territory after her first illness, that I began to be worried. I had, as when the wardrobe was previously occupied, fixed a casuarina branch up against it so that she could walk down with comparative ease, knowing her pathological aversion to be being shut in or trapped in any way. But she refused to come down, unless I collared her and physically hauled her off, and then pleaded in great distress to be put back.

When she finally did come down of her own accord the reason became evident. The incident with the dog happened to take place while the room was being converted from a bedroom to a makeshift study, so that all the furniture was in a different position from what she would have remembered during her nightly visits. She blundered hopelessly around, nosing out the location of her previous favourite spots, obviously bewildered by the fact that the bed was gone and the rest of the key objects were in different relative positions. If an obstacle in front of her was slightly to one side, so that her whiskers brushed it, she avoided it, but if it was directly in front of her, so that her whiskers missed it, she walked straight ahead and stubbed her nose on it.

I had previously suspected that there was something amiss when I noticed that she had started coming out at about three o'clock in the afternoon,, sitting in the full sunlight, sometimes staring directly into

the sun. Even in that light her pupils were fully expanded. And she was apparently able to see, or do something equivalent with her other senses to observe, objects in the middle distance during the day. Her diurnal peregrinations were temporarily curtailed when Cassie was big enough to make it clear that her eyes didn't like that sort of light, but resumed after the baby's death. When the next bout of illness first set in I found her late one afternoon wandering around out of her territory, apparently totally disorientated. I took her inside, and, suspecting eye trouble, turned out the lights; when I flicked a cigarette lighter she moved towards the flame like a moth. I suspected that she was attracted to the light because light was the only thing she could see, but at the time she could still get around well enough in her own known territory, and there were no visible cataracts, so I decided that I must be wrong.

Now it was apparent that she was effectively blind, at least at night. After a few days she was able to get around my room without any trouble, but it wasn't her sight that had improved, but her knowledge of the area. She had memorised most of it by then. This became clear when she ventured outside down the plank a couple of days later. She walked straight into any object, including the wall of the house, and if she missed the bottom of the plank by even two inches proceeded to run, literally, in circles, becoming more and more agitated until she suddenly took off in desperation, in any direction of the compass. I tried taking her back to her own trees, and indeed she could move around in them far more freely, but during her absence her various neighbours had encroached on her former preserve. `Miri' refused to stay there - if I stayed with her, she came down on my shoulder, asking to be taken `home' to my room, just as she had during her previous convalescence whenever I tried to keep her in my room; if I left her alone she tried to come back on her own - she seemed able to get the general direction from the house-light, but got lost in the convolutions of the bushes and topography in between. After one hair-raising incident when, purely by good luck, I found her blundering about on the other side of the property from where I'd left her, headed straight into the creek, I desisted.

With all this against her, she still managed to find a *modus vivendi*. She persisted in going out into the trees adjacent to my room, and gradually learnt her way around. The first few nights were traumatic, for me at least. I had to keep a very strict watch on her, but the minute I turned my back she'd disappear, becoming disorientated and running panic-stricken in any direction. But she soon learnt to stay close to the house, within the range of the lights, and not long thereafter was familiar enough with the area outside the window to find her way back, provided everything stayed put and the light stayed on to guide her. She had difficulty with the above ground routes at first, following the scent trails of the others only to come to a dead end, since there were numerous gaps in the routes, involving jumps of between six inches and about three feet. `Miri' would come to a gap and stop. She knew, whether by scent, hearing, or because she could dimly see, that the route continued beyond the gap, and she would reach out with her front paws, moving them backwards and forwards, trying to locate the next branch, precisely as a blind human moves his hands backwards and forwards trying to locate an object. But if her hands didn't actually encounter the branch, even when it was no more than two inches beyond, she dared not jump. She knew that there was a gap, but she didn't know whether it was six inches or six feet. So she had to establish alternative, longer routes of her own.

It was clear that while she was effectively blind at night, she could still see middle distance objects in the day. She eventually solved

the problem: she put herself on the day shift.

With this, and her increasing familiarity with the area, she then moved about in the daytime almost as freely as the sighted possums moved at night. Watching her, you might guess at the weakened back legs from the awkwardness of some of the movements, but the last thing you would have suspected was that she was blind. As she now knew the place by heart, some nocturnal activity was possible; on those rare occasions when one of the local gentlemen was suddenly very interesting to her, she made a late night of it, or an early morning. If caught out in the dark after the houselights were out, she had the sense to stay up a tree until daylight, just as a sighted possum will stay up a tree all day waiting for darkness.

In addition to enabling her to move around more easily, reversing night and day also meant she had exclusive possession of a prize territory during her waking hours, and that, after all, is the basis of the dominance syndrome in possums. The dominant seems to have a highly aggressive nature and an acutely developed territorial drive, the will to own, exclusively, all the available space, or, if circumstances preclude this, to nullify the presence of the others by reducing them to a permanent state of subservience, so that if any of them happens to be where the dominant wishes to be, they will instantly evaporate - just as if they weren't there at all. By putting herself on the day shift, `Miri' achieved a situation where they really weren't there, and all she had to tolerate was the olfactory testimony of their previous presence.

The English word `possum' started as a slang contraction of `opossum', applied to the Australian marsupials under the initial false assumption that they were, or were closely related to, the South American opossums, and then became the proper designation for the unrelated Australians when it emerged that they were entirely different. In Latin, however, `*possum*' means, `I can'. A very serendipitous designation.

There are always more possums, each one different, each with a story.

Endnotes

i. Ordinary cow's milk with a little sugar dissolved in it by bringing it to the boil and allowing it to cool. I must point out that I have since been informed that this is very bad for other native animals who are unable to digest it properly; in ring-tails it causes cataracts, in other species it is more immediately fatal. Powdered milk or soy milk are better.

This does not seem to be true with bushy-tails, who probably owe their success in the suburbs in part to their ability to digest most human food - or for that matter small quantities of dog and cat food. Some first make their presence known by regularly finishing up milk put out for domestic pets. Many, especially the females, do indeed develop cataracts in later years, but it so happens that those who received milk most regularly from me, Joey, Snoopy, Kylie and Miri, showed no signs of doing so up to the time when I last saw them; Snoopy was then four and a half years old, Kylie three. `Miri', who might or might not have been the same possum as the baby Miri, did develop cataracts, but in her case the onset coincided with a very bad attack of the unidentified seasonal disease which seems endemic among the Newport possums in late summer and early autumn, and which left her with her hind legs out of commission for several months, and permanently partially disabled, as well as partially blind.

On the other hand, it is difficult for a small baby to adjust to a complete change of diet - all those mentioned had some sort of digestive troubles at first - and one unnamed baby with whom I had to do did indeed die of what appeared to be digestive troubles (see Part II, pp. 176 ff.) Yet another reason why hand-rearing a baby should be tried only as a last resort.

ii. See Jenny's `twins', p. 299 f. and Bindi's problems handling Miri as well as Meggs, pp. 301 ff. In another instance, which happened without human intervention, one of the Newport females of later times, Dido, herself a ‘twin’, bemused by some sort of brain disease or injury of which she died shortly thereafter, adopted either the young Juni's son Jemmy, or Toecutter's son Puggy, in addition to her own son - or perhaps lost her own baby and adopted both, cf. Note xxxiii. After she died, despite my efforts to try to sort things out, the two babies `imprinted' on to each other, each regarding the other as its mother, with potentially disastrous results: in a crisis, each would try to jump on to the other's back to be carried to safety, which resulted in a stationary, scrabbling, vulnerable ball of baby possums on the ground or floor, just waiting to be eaten by the nearest predator. They disappeared very early. Since bushy-tails are meant to be solitary, say one female to 2½ acres, it seems probable that no behavioural provision for this situation has developed. In a bush situation the chances of a young baby wandering into the proximity of the wrong female would be very low. While it seems possible that a `twinning' gene might occur in a genetically isolated family group of neighbouring females, necessitating the development of some sort of `normal' behaviour patterns to cover this contingency, this would be a matter of `local culture', not of something innate in brush-tails as a whole.

iii. With females, at least, this is something of which I have had all too frequent experience - I'm the one who has to clean up. Snoopy, of course, scent-marked her territory daily, trailing the fluid from the rear gland across the floor, and chest-marking objects of particular significance, the corners of the wardrobe which served as boundaries of her scuttling-place, the legs of the chairs, my legs. In the end I ignored the chest-marking, which does not result in too conspicuous a smell to the human nose - although the behaviour of the baby Snoopy, sniffing out where Joey had scent-marked six months before, and of Miri, similarly seeking out Snoopy's favourite spots after a like interval, suggests it is more durable to a possum's sense of smell. As regards the scent-trails, I put down bits of lino where she was most likely to lay one, and cleaned them as little as possible. She was even more upset when I removed one of these scent-trails than when I cleaned away her body wastes; in the latter case her reaction was one of uncontrollable fury, in the former the fury was mingled with utter dismay - I was disorientating her, taking her territory away.

Not only did Snoopy leave trails across the floor at Ingleside, but those of the Newport possums who at one stage or another have had proprietorial feelings about my room - `Pumpkin', her daughter Chrissie, and `Miri', frequently laid trails along the window ledge, and elsewhere when possible. On one occasion Dido, who at this point seemed to have conceived (doomed) designs on that room, seized an opportunity and was methodically laying a trail along the top of a low bookcase until she encountered an

obstacle in the form of my leg. Undeterred, she continued blithely over the top of the obstacle, laying her trail all the way. She really was, without doubt, the stupidest possum I've ever met.

The fluid excreted is not urine. Possum urine is a clear, bright orange-brown liquid when fresh, resembling nothing so much as what used to be served on the Manly Ferry under the name of `orange drink'. It dries to leave a dark stain. The fluid excreted when marking a trail is a thick, milky viscous liquid which dries to leave a white line on the surface to which it is applied. When laying the trail, the female sometimes squats slightly, as if urinating, and occasionally urine is passed at the same time. However, the fact that the presence of urine is not invariable, in fact infrequent, suggests that this is coincidental, perhaps a separate reflex triggered off by the similarity of the position assumed. The case may be different with possums in other areas, or perhaps even with males - I cannot recall Joey, or for that matter Erik, the two males who most had the run of indoor areas, ever laying a trail as opposed to chest-marking, but that may well mean no more than that they did it, in the manner described, and I took no conscious notice because there was nothing unusual about it.

With Snoopy, there seemed to be a differentiation in the usage of the two forms of marking: the rear gland secretion was used for establishing routes, the chest-marking was used to establish ownership of actual possessions. Possibly the distinction arose purely as a matter of physical convenience: the rear gland secretion is appropriate to horizontal surfaces, such as the ground or horizontal tree branches, along which the possum walks, while vertical surfaces, such as tree trunks, up which a possum usually bounds, and so would leave sizeable gaps in the trail if the anal gland were employed, are more conveniently dealt with by chest-rubbing. However, Snoopy seemed to distinguish not so much between situations which were physically appropriate to one or the other as between situations which were qualitatively appropriate. I was, of course, one of her most treasured possessions, and she re-affirmed her ownership virtually every day by chest-rubbing my legs. Despite the fact that she had ample and frequent opportunity to lay an anal trail across them, when I was sitting on the floor after dinner watching television and she marched to and fro across me at will, I cannot remember her ever attempting to do so; while I cannot be sure that my shoes were never automatically smeared with the fluid, when she was laying a trail and then proceeded to sit down on my foot, she never deliberately laid a trail across me, in the manner of Dido's grand performance. Though of course, it may be that Snoopy was aware of the futility of such an action - that part of the trail was likely to get up and walk away any minute - while Di just didn't seem to think that far.

iv. Therefore, strictly, they are `home ranges', not `territories'.

v. For example, there was no distinct female dominant at Newport after Jenny's death, because the candidates were disqualified for one reason or another. Dido had the size, the will, the aggression, and the expanding territorial ambitions, but she was simply too stupid to put them into effect - not as humorous as it first seemed, since it emerged that there was some physical problem with her brain, from which she subsequently died. `Miri' had all the qualifications, but suffered a disastrous health problem (see Part III), which prevented her from taking over the role. `Pumpkin', the senior female, had the size, and was not lacking in intelligence; she was a kind of possum version of the emperor Claudius, extremely eccentric, and really a fool in some ways, but highly astute in others. However, she was the gentlest natured of possums, both with humans and with other possums (see below, pp. 336 ff.). She was rather like Snoopy. She was just too nice a possum to ever want to be a dominant. Her daughter Chrissie briefly seemed to be in contention, but was similarly disbarred by her personality (see pp. 336 ff.) The obvious heir apparent was young Juni, but her time was not yet: she was only a few weeks out of the pouch when Jenny died.

vi. I am reliably informed that the technical term is `averted gaze'.

vii. There seems some doubt as to whether `rape' is technically possible; in some other species of marsupials lordosis, and so some response on the part of the female, is necessary for intromission to take place. With brush-tails, however, there is an added factor to take into consideration, since the angle of entry can be varied extensively: while normal, voluntary mating takes place with the couple in the horizontal plane, the male mounting the female from the rear in the common quadruped manner, when an over-

enthusiastic male literally jumps on a female they can be in any relationship to the horizontal plane, including dangling upside down by their tails, so that the angle of the male's body to the females can vary drastically. Whatever the exact truth of the matter, if there is any momentary response by the female in such situations it is very brief, and so instinctual that she herself is unaware of it - she escapes at the first possible moment, never having ceased to struggle and resist, and runs, terrified and panic-stricken.

viii. The only time I've known this to happen it seemed to be an accident. The male, in his ardour, left his departure too late, and found himself caught out in the daylight. In a panic, he squeezed himself into the nearest refuge, the female's nest, preferring the hostile treatment he received there to being exposed during the day.

ix.. This interpretation is, of course, debatable. It has been suggested to me by Mr. Malcolm Smith that Jenny's behaviour was simply a matter of a conflict between two drives, food envy and her inhibition against aggression towards her baby, solved, as in Not Seeing, by turning away and so removing the aggression stimulus. This is possible, but difficult. There appeared to be an extra movement in Jenny's action which needs to be accounted for. Starting with head and body frontal, the food more or less in line with her body, she would turn her head and shoulders to the side, away from the baby, leaving the lower part of her body frontal, at the same time moving her hands, with the bread, towards the baby. All very awkward.

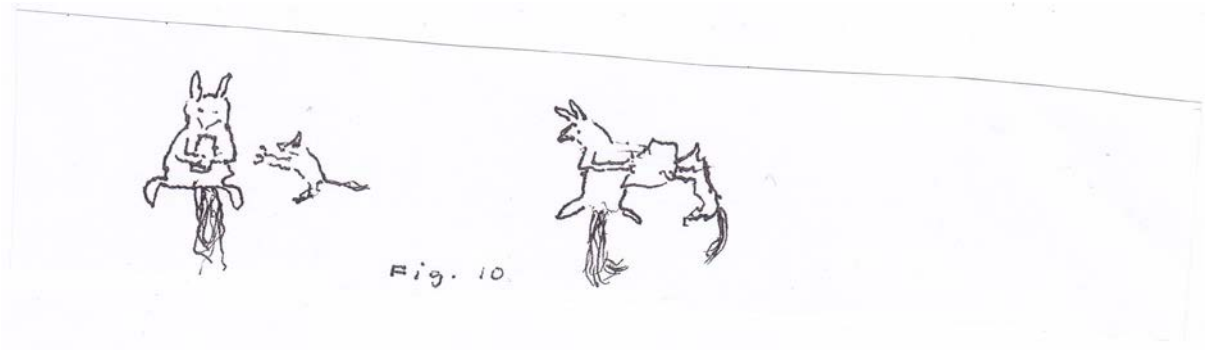

Fig. 10

The only alternative to Jenny's encouraging the baby to steal would seem to be that Jenny was actually feeding the baby, which is `worse'.

At first sight there seems nothing extraordinary about that. But mother possums do not usually feed their babies; at best they hold the food in a position where it is convenient for the baby, as well as themselves, to eat it, but it is the baby who initiates this by evincing a desire for the food, often actually pulling it closer to itself. There is in fact nothing in a possum's experience which would suggest the concept that it itself is a food-giver: babies suck from their mothers; later they share her food, but in both cases it is they who take it from her. It is easy to see why a possum could conceive of its mother as a food-giver, and even transfer the concept to a human who normally provides handouts, but for any individual to conceive of <u>itself</u> in that way seems to involve a conceptual jump of a higher order of magnitude than most possums show capacity for. Jenny, to be sure, was very bright, and bright in just the particular way needed - she had a remarkable ability to comprehend a situation as a whole. But one still wonders what, in her experience, could have given her the idea.

Nevertheless, the point can be settled, at least as far as the possibility of an exceptionally bright mother being able to conceive of herself in this role is concerned. In spring 1977 I was watching Sherry, the brightest of the surviving foxy-possums, eating carrot with her current baby, Spica. They specialized in double-dangling, either hanging side by side with tails overlapping as they twined around

the branch, or, to bring Spica's mouth level with Sherry's, if Sherry were holding a piece of food too heavy for Spica to support in that position, Sherry would hang by her tail from the branch and Spica would hang by her tail, curled not around the branch, but around the base of Sherry's, so that Sherry supported the weight of both. They were dangling side by side like this when they came to the end of the carrot - there were about two mouthfuls left. Spica wanted some of it, but Sherry wanted it too, and held it away from her, out of reach in the hand furthest from the baby. However, she relented. After taking another bite, while she was still chewing it in her interminable foxy-poss way, she moved her arm back diagonally across her body, and literally popped the remaining morsel into the baby's mouth. There is no doubt that Sherry voluntarily and deliberately fed her baby.

x. One of the best examples of this discrimination between individuals comes from late 1989 or early 1990, outside the main period covered by this book, and concerns a possum named Sweetie, my dog Trixie, then a puppy, and a dog on an adjacent property. Sweetie turned up one night with a nasty injury, a deep dog canine tooth mark behind one ear - it must have been a very near thing, the dog must have had her by the back of the neck. I do not know which dog was responsible. Every dog in the neighbourhood was a potential suspect, except Trixie, not because of my partiality for my own, but because of dentition - this was an adult dog tooth mark, and she was still a needle-mouth. However, the prime suspect had to be a dog residing on one of the adjacent properties: at that time Sweetie was in the habit of frequenting the bushes along that fence-line, and the dog had already killed a bandicoot, perhaps by mistake for a rat. In any case, I never again saw Sweetie anywhere near that property - she changed her nightly haunts. She never again appeared with any sign of being molested by a dog.

I had assumed that Trixie, being an oversized cattle dog cross, would be a yard-dog, not a house-dog, let alone a bed-dog, and at that time she was still in the process of re-educating me. She was supposed to sleep outside in the comparative luxury of a retired caravan, and at the least got her nightly grooming there. She was, of course, like all my domestic animals, conditioned from babyhood to the idea that the worst thing she could do was molest the wildlife, but with her things went further of their own accord. Dogs seem to come in two sorts, those which hate cats, and those which love them with a fanaticism which would shame even the most ardent human cat-fancier. Trixie was the latter type - brought up with an adult tom-cat, she regarded him as her father, her pack leader and her god, and thought the world began and ended with him; consequently she proved something of a problem when out on the lead, since the sight of cat was apt to result in the near-dislocation of my shoulder - she wanted to get to the cat, not to chase it, but to love it and lick it, but unfortunately not all cats knew that. She seemed to think the possums were another sort of cat - occasionally some deep buried instinct caused her to tense for a spring towards her potential dinner, but if the possum remained close sheer adoration always outweighed that reflex - heaven was when a possum actually touched noses with her in greeting.

So far from steering clear of the caravan because of the dog-smell after her experience, Sweetie started turning up as soon as I put the light on to groom Trixie, and coming right inside to ask for a handout. Trixie thought all her Christmases had come at once. Since she and I were together, when Sweetie came up to me to ask for bread, Trixie apparently thought she was coming to her. Sweetie very soon got into the habit of coming straight up to Trixie on the floor at my feet and touching noses with her. Since I tossed the bread down from above, it gave the impression that Trixie was giving it to her. Trixie herself seemed have some idea about what the proper ceremony was - if for some reason I didn't produce a piece of bread for Sweetie immediately, not only did I have Sweetie importuning but I also had Trixie agitating for me to perform my proper role. So in a sense she did get her handout from Trixie, at least insofar as Trixie made sure that it was provided.

So, after her experience, she stayed well away from the dog who had attacked her, which was dangerous, but struck up a very close, physically close, relationship with another dog, Trixie, who was safe and possibly useful. Not only did Sweetie make a total distinction between Trixie and her attacker, whoever it was, but she brought up her two subsequent daughters, Sooky and Chooky to follow the same nightly routine, coming into the caravan to get a handout from Trixie. For several years, therefore, Trixie had her own personal possum friends who got their handouts, not so much from me, as from her.
The relationship between the possums and the dog was therefore very similar to that which can spring up between possums and horses, described below.

xi. There is apparently some doubt about this gait, perhaps because it is very specialized in regard to the conditions of its use, and so seldom seen, especially in the suburbs. It is used as the gait for long distance travel on the ground through the more sparsely covered marginal areas, such as the slopes up from the creek depression at Ingleside, places where there is still, however, enough general vegetation to hide the presence of the animal concerned. When it becomes necessary for the possum to cover cleared spaces, it reverts to the diagonal scuttling run, which keeps it lower to the ground - the danger of cleared spaces is that it might be seen by a predator when it is out of range of trees, and the last thing it wants is to make itself conspicuous. Nothing could be more conspicuous than possum bobbing up and down across a clearing. Alternatively, it is used when a possum has already been spotted, and is fleeing across the ground to the nearest tree, a situation in which speed is at a premium, and concealment no longer relevant: the diagonal gait is lightning fast, but only over a very short distance. Erik would break into the bounding gait when I was accidentally `hunting' him, once he regained enough strength in his hind legs to do so.

It is rarely used in the suburbs, because situations appropriate to its use seldom occur. From the possum point of view, the suburban landscape is composed of trees, or their equivalent, such as roofs, above ground routes in any case, open spaces across which it is advisable to run, and safe areas where predators are excluded - by human intervention or otherwise - in which it is permissible to trot in a leisurely manner. I remember vividly the first time I encountered it, probably the best part of a year after I consciously started watching possums. Mrs. Poss was late for her handout, and I was waiting for her in the usual place. The night was fine and I was lying down on the grass beside a tussock about 18" high. Suddenly Mrs. Poss came flying over the tussock, body upright in the air, ears erect, for all the world like an overgrown jackrabbit. I nearly died of shock.

To my mind there is no doubt that it is essentially a bipedal gait. Both hind legs work together, providing the motive power, and the front paws play no effective role. While they may touch the ground between bounds when the possum is travelling comparatively slowly, they do not produce any of the thrust, and when the possum picks up speed, need not touch the ground at all. I was discussing this matter with someone one evening, and returned home with the point still fresh in my mind, when Battered Baby obligingly gave a demonstration of a single movement: she was holding a slice of bread, her mouth in the centre of one side, and one front hand on each of the perpendicular sides, when she bounded over an obstacle about 18" high. Her body remained upright, her hands remained full of her dinner, and she landed on her hind feet. I have since seen at least one other possum do likewise, and in other instances, even when the light was too poor to actually see whether or not the front paws touched the ground, the angle of the body to the ground made it clear that they did not.

xii. At Newport, not long before first drafting this, I saw Sherry, then the brightest of the remaining foxy-possums, apparently use her outer, little finger on her front paw to oppose the others when holding a slice of bread, although the necessary pressure was being applied by the larger fourth finger, which she curved, arching it up against the bread, and the little finger was merely a backboard. It was probably fortuitous, but Sherry was just the sort of possum who might exploit such a happy accident; unfortunately, I never managed to spot her doing it again.

xiii. Snoopy used to do it, accompanied by tail-lashing, in a context which made it quite clear that she was torn between two things: having just chased Kylie or Bindi out the window she was wavering on the sill, torn between rage at the effrontery of the intrusion and the desire to chase the offender further, and fear born of a knowledge of her own physical inferiority and what she could expect from her opponent once she no longer had the advantage of being in her own core territory.

At first I thought it was just Snoopy, who was no doubt eccentric, and could hardly be used as a case to establish the norm. But I later heard other females click, in the same sort of context, indecision and conflict of strong emotions. `Miri', a normally aggressive and hyper-territorial female (cf. above, Note v), but disabled through illness, was being plagued by a neighbouring female, one of the foxy-poss crosses who seemed to answer to `Moto', and could possibly have been Foxy's daughter of that name. `Moto' was making repeated intrusions into `Miri' 's core territory. Normally this invader was despatched with celerity, but now the ailing territory holder's movements were so hampered that the interloper simply moved ten feet or so when she came towards her, sat down and had a snack from the

nearest tree until `Miri' made her painful way to within a few feet of her, then flashed away again, as likely as not back in the direction of the nest, by another route which was now too difficult for the incapacitated proprietor. Once clear, `Moto' sat down and had another snack, waiting until the exasperated `Miri' caught up with her again, after having to go the long way round. This went on for about twenty minutes, until the intruder happened to be on the periphery of the territory, though by no means out of the precinct usually forbidden her. `Miri', in obvious distress, began to lash her tail and click, starting off to chase `Moto' again, then stopping and coming back, starting off again, then finally decided that that would have to do, and returned to the nest.

`Pumpkin', too, clicked when I first tried to examine her injured baby, Marco (cf. below, pp. 336 f.), apparently feeling that she should protect him from me, but doubtful about attacking me, because I was a person she trusted, the one who fed her, and especially the one with whom she had made a practice of parking previous babies. I have since heard many other females click, in circumstances where such precise interpretation is impossible, but always in circumstances consistent with their being in a state of indecision.

xiv. He developed the somewhat annoying habit of coming in the window of the bedroom after I had turned the light out, when I was asleep or nearly asleep, marching up the bed and going `Nif, Nif, Nif, Where's the bread?' in my ear. Now Pig knew the layout of my bedroom fairly well. He knew where any bread that was left was likely to be, and if I refused to take any notice of him, would root around and find it for himself. He knew full well that it was not kept in my lug-hole. What he was doing with his `Nif, Nif, Nif' was trying to get my attention and persuade me to get it for him, to save him the time and effort involved in jumping down from the bed and riffling through a plastic bag a food below the aforesaid lug-hole.

Apart from being somewhat irritating when I had only just got to sleep, there was only one real problem with this. Sometimes, annoyed at the interruption and aware that he had already been fed, I would reach out sleepily and brush him away - and encounter something far less innocuous, like Juni, who was still growing out of her adolescent biting phase, or Dido, who never did.

All such activities were curtailed when the bedroom was converted into a makeshift study, but Pig, the chief exponent of the noble art of Nif, Nif, Nif apparently felt that it ought not be allowed to languish. Not long after the conversion he was begging for something I was loth to part with - my cup of tea, I think. He had me trapped in a chair beside the erstwhile dressing table, so I put it as far away as I could on the dressing table, not expecting it to avail me much, since he had previously had no compunctions about jumping up there if the occasion arose. Instead, he planted himself firmly on my lap and proceeded to Nif, Nif, Nif in my face, his nose touching mine. He could just as easily have sniffed it out for himself, as it was only about eighteen inches away, but that, no doubt, would have spoilt the game.

xv. This seems to involve what is known as displacement, with perhaps a degree of reconstitution - for an intelligible explanation of these terms, though in a specifically linguistic context, see Eugene Linden, *Apes, Men and Language* (Pelican Books, 1976), pp. 68-9 etc. In the old days the capacity for this kind of thought was supposed to be the exclusive prerogative of man: animals were prisoners of the moment, unable to reason because they responded only to immediate stimuli (again, for a `popular' account, *Apes, Men and Language*, e.g. p. 35). The argument never seemed particularly cogent: because man has specialized in reasoning, it doesn't seem to follow necessarily that other species cannot reason at all, particularly when one considers the case with other specialities of the various species. For example, the fact that monkeys (and, among the non-placentals, possums) specialize in climbing does not mean that other animals do not climb at all; even among mammals, cats and rats, for example, climb quite effectively, although they are not in the same class as far as virtuosity goes. Mammals such as otters, seals, beavers, platypuses, and, above all dolphins and whales, have specialized in swimming; this does not mean that other species cannot swim at all; most can in fact swim a little - often not very well, but swim they do when they have to. While some specialities are indeed exclusive, it seems to beg the question to assume *a priori* that mental specialities must fall into this category, rather than the more common one, in which there is a gradation of capacity throughout a range of species. It should hardly be surprising, therefore, that the `higher mammals' are capable of a minimal amount of forethought and reasoning.

This view of man as the exclusive proprietor of all powers of reasoning, rather than their best exponent, has fortunately been broken down in recent years. In particular, the tool-making chimpanzees of the Gombe Reserve, and the Ameslan-speaking chimps of the American Institute for Primate Studies have cast grave doubts on the physiological arguments advanced in support of the old hypothesis. And a gorilla who tells lies, and, moreover, tells lies in a situation where the truth might involve unpleasant personal consequences, seems likely to prove a lasting embarrassment to special elitists who wish to make all other animals `prisoners of the moment'.

Given this, it no longer seems outlandish to attribute an even lesser capacity for displacement to `lower' species still, with the rider that within a given species there will always be a great deal of variation in the capacity of different individuals. Bushy-tail possums are certainly not the lowest of the low; in practice, in everyday life, their performance in terms of what they work out for themselves, as opposed to what they can be taught, suggests to me that they cover roughly the same intelligence range as dogs and cats: a few are extra bright, most are moderately bright, and some are blithering idiots. It is not particularly surprising that Joey did what he did; the astonishing thing is that he did it at such an early age, though later I saw another small baby doing something which appeared to be comparable.

What seems to be a clear adult example of the capacity for at least minimal displacement was provided later by `Pumpkin', see below, pp. 337 f.

I can think of nothing that sheds much light on the question of how many moves ahead a possum can think, or for that matter the question of numeracy. I did not count the number of bricks in the last sequence which Erik unscrambled; at the time I wasn't trying to devise an intelligence test, I was trying to keep a recalcitrant old invalid in for his own good. `Miri' seemed to be able to count up to three, at least in the sense of `that one, and that one, and that one', after which, presumably, there were `a lot'. When she first became ill, she was quite emaciated, but too weak even to make the effort to eat, unless I put before her something completely irresistible, so that she started eating before she knew it - just like a human invalid. What proved to be irresistible in her case was a certain thin type of biscuit called `Honey Snaps'; she effectively lived on these for several weeks, going through half a dozen at a session, with a little bit of banana and Jonathan apple thrown in. Naturally, I didn't think this was a good idea on a permanent basis, and as she recovered I started to reduce the number of biscuits, substituting more suitable food. We struck trouble when we got down to four: she seemed to know that there should be that one, and that one, and that one - and more, though how much more she was uncertain. However, again it was a matter of coping *ad hoc* with a particular situation rather than devising an intelligence test; I didn't think of trying to fool her by breaking the biscuits in half, supplying the same number of smaller units, until after the whole situation changed and the point became irrelevant; it is therefore uncertain whether this was an instance of true numeracy or not, whether what she considered her entitlement was a certain number of biscuits, or a certain quantity of biscuit.

xvi. I have since seen this mode of travel used regularly by possums whose nightly route takes them through vegetation such as bamboo. The most spectacular performer was Timmy, who used precisely the same technique, going up the opposite side of the stem to the direction in which he wished to travel, but he practised it on forty-foot bamboo in order to cross over a concrete drive.

This would seem, debatably, to put them in the class of borderline tool-users, as opposed to tool-makers. Another of Joey's baby games seems to point in the same direction: he delighted in playing with a fine rope or cord; if I took a short piece of cord and jiggled it provocatively in front of him, he would seize it with alacrity, and haul it in hand over hand, like a miniature Jack Tar, allowing the excess to fall loosely to the ground below his hands as he acquired the next section; he seldom attempted to climb it; the obvious aim of the game was to capture what was on the end of the rope, namely my hand, to be `attacked' or cuddled as the mood took him when he finally hauled in his prize. I presume this to be a reflection of a situation where coveted, tender leaves occur at the end of a pliant branch, and can similarly be hauled in by hauling on the stem: while I have never seen an exact parallel, I have seen possums pull supple stems towards them in order to bring the leaves at the end within reach. Again, the tendency of some to allow compliant humans to hold cumbersome pieces of food for them, for example a slice of bread, but place their own hands over the human's and move them as they would their own to turn the food gradually as they eat first one part then another, although it seems purely reflexive (see Note xviii) may point in the same direction. Certainly they are quick to see the use of such tools when

supplied; whenever the babies got themselves cornered by larger possums, out of my reach, I would scout around for a long stick with which I could reach them; they came down this extension of my arm, although it itself was unfamiliar to them, almost instantaneously, if not quite so automatically as they would have come down my arm itself in a similar situation; only after experience had taught them wisdom did they hesitate, questioning my judgment as to whether the stick I had snatched up was strong enough to hold their weight, and whether my arm was strong enough to hold the stick, often about six feet long, steady under their weight when both arm and stick were fully extended. At a much later date I had occasion to try to smooth over an altercation between Dido, her adolescent daughter Tari, and `Miri', before they jointly destroyed my room and the adjacent area outside. As usual, the method was to distract them and calm the ruffled tempers by presenting them each with a slice of bread. By the time I got to Tari she was up a tree, out of reach; she dangled hopefully, but was still ten feet above my head. The only vehicle for the bread which I could see nearby was a dead casuarina branch, with a twig over which the bread could be hooked about six or eight inches from the end. The end of the branch could just reach Tari, but the bread was still out her reach so she promptly seized the end of the branch and hauled it in until she brought the bread within reach.

The question will not be settled unless and until some extra bright possum, on its own initiative, publicly picks up a stick and uses it to hook a bunch of leaves that is out of its reach, or, less likely because the necessary size of the stick relative to the possum, to form a bridge across a short gap - a gap small enough to be bridged by a stick the size a possum could handle would normally be jumped.

While this is not entirely beyond the bounds of possibility for a possum superbright like the young Jenny, particularly if the possum in question had a previous, serendipitous experience such as those described, I should be startled if a possum ever actually made a tool, trimming a stick to a suitable size and shape for its purpose. While, because of their well-nigh pathological aversion to displaying intelligence except where there is good possum, as opposed to human , reason to do so, it is very difficult to say how intelligent possums aren't, I have never seen anything to suggest that they are quite of that order.

xvii. There are nearly as many definitions of humour as there are of intelligence, but one, certainly, involves taking pleasure in surprise, a sudden reversal of expectations, with an element of absurdity, a paradoxically congruous incongruity. And primitive humour is notoriously cruel, entailing pleasure at the discomfort of another party, a joke at someone else's expense. One incident involving Mephistopheles fulfils both these criteria.

When Meph first arrived his recent eye injury seemed to have upset his binocular vision, and hence his ability to judge distance accurately, particularly close up. He was forever taking part of my hand in mistake for the food I was offering - quite accidentally, and he himself exhibited signs of distress when he realised what had happened. But once he broke the skin the biting reflex took over, and he battened on with the typical possum bulldog grip. If I tried to pull my hand away, I tore it on his teeth, if I left it where it was he sank his teeth in progressively further. I was damned if I did, and damned if I didn't.

My mother made light of the situation, so finally, whenever he appeared, I called her and told her her possum was waiting. Mephistopheles had me terrified, and he knew it.

The other person he had terrified was poor little Foxy, then somewhere between six months and a year old, and coping valiantly with a grossly distended pouch: tiny Foxy, like all her line, was a miniature possum in comparison to the females of the surrounding groups, and the baby, as it turned out, was a cross with the large Jenny-Poss family, who took after them in regard to size. Meph seemed to derive great pleasure from the fact that here was a female small enough and timid enough for him to bully, and proceeded to tease the life out of her.

He haunted us whenever I went out to feed her, chasing her, stealing her bread, and generally disrupting proceedings to the utmost of his ability, all the more so when he found that I'd give him extra food in an attempt to keep him quiet while she had hers. The whole Foxy family seemed to have taken the adage about chewing each mouthful a hundred times as holy writ - something which may perhaps finally have been explained as an hereditary tendency to pancreatitis and digestive troubles generally. Meph. of course, would wolf whatever I gave him, and then be back plaguing Foxy before her lugubrious masticatations had made even a perceptible start on her share. From Meph's point of view, the whole situation was

obviously highly satisfactory.

On the occasion in question, he had both me and Foxy thoroughly unnerved. I was reduced to precisely that state in which, above all, one should never allow oneself to be when dealing with animals, namely impotent indecision.

Foxy was on one end of a low branch with Meph approaching, yet again, from the other. I was between them, with a slice of bread in my hand, vacillating between giving it to Foxy in the hope she could escape with it and giving it to Meph, to hold him while I found another for her; my hand and the bread were oscillating backwards and forwards between them in time with my vacillations.

Meph viewed the scene with mild exasperation. And then he sprang.

It was one of those situations where your perceptions speed up to the point where time seems to slow down - a fraction of a second seems like hours. I could see Meph's movement as if it were in slow motion, but I literally couldn't move a muscle to do anything about it. And I thought, `I'm gone this time, for sure.'

He made one of those huge, exaggerated, predatory pounces, the sort that characterized little Joey's play, arcing high in the air, up on his back legs then down with his front paws. Straight on to my paralysed hand. Gotcha.

But a couple of inches above my hand he checked his movement, and his front paws just brushed my hand, as lightly as a falling leaf.

I nearly fainted.

Mephistopheles sat up there on the branch with his whole body radiating pure delight. He thought it was the funniest thing that had happened since Noah mistook the snake for a sloe-worm. Freely translated, he sat up there on the branch laughing his ruddy head off.

It was some minutes before I could share the joke, and laugh with him.

Apparently, during the period when my mother was handling his regular feeding, he had gradually been adjusting to his disability and now, once more, was capable of judging his movements to perfection. All unbeknownst to me.

All the ingredients are here. The whole point of the episode, the reason for Mephistopheles' enjoyment, was that, contrary to expectation, he had not hurt me. The incongruity is there, too - he nearly frightened me to death by not hurting me. And he certainly seemed to derive a great deal of pleasure out of my discomfort, all the more so because it was absurd - he knew my fears to be baseless.

xviii. This, too, is by no means as astonishing as it first appears, but is perhaps another case of an intelligent possum adapting an established action to a new situation in which it is appropriate. Jenny, as well as some of the others, often took advantage of my compliance if I gave them something bulky to eat, such as a slice of bread, letting me support the weight but placing their hands over mine and guiding the food to the most convenient position for eating, turning it constantly as each section was consumed, to get to the next. What the real origin of this practice is I do not know - perhaps it is somehow connected with the fact that a number of the brighter females regularly hold food in a position where it is convenient for their babies to get it. However, I have never seen a baby place its hands over its mother's to guide it - if the baby wants the food moved closer, it just pulls at it, or snatches a small piece off it. The action of placing their hands over mine seems to be purely reflexive rather than deliberately thought out: they act exactly as if they themselves were holding the object in question, which, in a sense, they are, per medium of the `handles' in the form of my hands. In similar vein, those fed in the dish on the end of the stick sometimes take hold of the dish, and move it as necessary, rather than taking the food out of it - somewhat irritating in a group situation, since you can't feed the next possum until the current one has finished.

xix. The same was true in the case of Snoopy's own daughter, Kylie. I didn't take as much of a hand in her raising as I did with Snoopy. I simply let Snoopy raise her herself, with only minor assistance where necessary. But I was in close physical contact with Kylie. She slept with Snoopy on or in the bed as the case might be. She shared the food I provided for Snoopy, both her dish of human food and her vases of leaves. Both would cadge some of my food - often exactly the same as what they were given, even cut from the same apple or banana - it was the social aspect of the game which made them leave theirs if they could get some of mine. I petted Kylie and played with her, as I petted and played with Snoopy. Snoopy

showed no signs whatsoever of rejecting Kylie until the proper stage of her development - more than the proper stage, as we found to our cost.

xx. There are others like it, but I haven't included them in this account. I'm sticking to the things which were repeated often enough to rule out coincidence, though there were some beauties.

Kylie, when she grew to independence and was returning to the house for handouts, on one occasion rang the wind-charm on the veranda when she wanted seconds. It's a good story, but a coincidence. It only happened once, and it happened when she came down, as most possums will, to see if she could cadge any more; her route lay past the the wind-charm and she accidentally rang it as she passed.

Mephistopheles `said' his eye injury was caused by a cat. What happened, as always when I say a possum `said' anything more complex than the basics (opinions of food, of sounds in the night - safe or unsafe, interesting or uninteresting - and soforth), was that the possum in question made one of the standard gestures known to both of us which it used when trying to communicate something, and I, through practice and knowledge of the individual animal's attitudes and moods and the circumstances, interpreted what the particular message was, and received some confirmation, either from the possum's reaction or from evidence found later. As any dog owner knows, this, with practice over a period of years, can result in quite sophisticated messages being passed. Well, in that sense, Mephistopheles said it was a cat. And, by coincidence, the sound produced by his own personal vocal equipment, modified by his mood, would be phonetically transcribed as, `kat-kat-kat'. So any way you look at it, `cat' was what he said. Another coincidence.

xxi. `Miri' at Newport developed the same gesture, namely actually throwing away an undesired piece of food, as a means of communication with me during the time she was convalescing from her first illness. At that stage, with her hind legs virtually out of commission, she was very clumsy about holding titbits when she was up a tree: her front paws had to take over some of the gripping and anchoring functions of the hind ones so that she had, at most, one hand to spare for food that would normally have required two. As a result, she was forever dropping things, peering down, stricken, as her favourite food of the moment tumbled to the ground. Naturally, I would pick up the piece in question and return it to her - it would have taken her about ten minutes to make her painful way down and retrieve it for herself, during which time she would have been at risk from any dog that happened to stray past. But she also dropped pieces of food which I offered her and which she decided she didn't want to eat. I was forever pestering the life out of her by persistently returning what she had already rejected several times, not recognising the difference between deliberate and accidental dropping. In exasperation she finally developed the habit of throwing the offending object away, on occasion, accidentally or otherwise, sending it hurtling down on my guilty head. Even an animal as stupid as a human could hardly mistake that!

Joking aside, possums do not seem to have a very high opinion of human intelligence. On several occasions during that period I caught `Miri' looking at me in what appeared to be astonishment, when I managed to do something right, correctly interpreting her signals as indicating that she wanted to be carried to her nest, or to a particular tree. Jenny behaved in the same manner while we were jointly looking after Snoopy, just as I often looked at her in sheer incredulity when either one of my more complex messages got through, or she worked out the situation for herself and came to the same conclusion as to what was required of her. Clearly, they hadn't realised that humans were so intelligent! Not surprising, considering that most humans, including myself at that stage, are as ignorant of possum etiquette as a backward possum baby, if not more so, which might well be one of the criteria for judging intelligence, or competence, or however they conceive of it. It has even reached the stage where an experienced possum like Big Pink Pig obviously expected to be touched and pawed over whenever he arrived, though he didn't really seem to like it. A great deal is to be laid at the door of inadequate communications, as opposed to inadequate intelligence.

xxii. An undirectional, prolonged loud calling, like a possum crying its territory before going to bed. I have heard at least one other male do it in similar circumstances, immediately after a successful coupling. The male involved was a particularly timid individual - he had even been temporarily put off by my presence when I happened to wander past while he was mounting the female. I had to discretely withdraw, so I cannot, I must admit, be sure he went on with it, although he was still in position when I

last actually saw him. But about twenty minutes later he appeared in a nearby tree yelling his head off, broadcasting in all directions. The area in question was one of the favourite possum haunts of that time of night, and normally he was wont to slink through in perpetual terror, not only of the females but also of the older, larger, resident male. The last thing he would have done was announce his presence so loudly and conspicuously.

xxiii. This `two-possum' phase seems to be a normal part of adolescence. Not only did both Snoopy and Kylie go through it, manifested in slightly different ways in each case because of their different personalities - in Kylie it merged into her embittered adult vendetta - but Juni (Jenny Junior, whom I inherited when Jenny died, and helped raise on a similar basis to Miri, i.e. not imprinted on me, see Epilogue) went through something very similar at the same age, between about six months and a year from the pouch. My relationship with other female juveniles who remained after they matured was not such that the phase would have been evident, since I seldom came into such physical proximity to them as would trigger off the biting reflex. However, I had noticed that adolescent females tended to be aggressive, but erratic in their behaviour, `neurotic', even when they were not apparently pregnant. And one of Sherry's daughters, Spica (the baby involved in the feeding incident, above, Note ix), showed very similar behaviour at the same age. As a baby, like all the others of her family who took after the Foxy-poss line, she was so tiny, and so much like a toy possum, that it was hard to keep your hands off her; like several others in her family, she herself actually seem to enjoy a moderate amount of petting. But one evening as I moved to touch her, she suddenly swung round on me, transformed into a miniature raging lion - or female possum. I must admit that I did not, in the interests of science, press the point to make sure that she had gone into a biting phase - I started feeding her with a stick and kept myself at a respectful distance where I would not provoke a biting reflex.

More importantly, Timmy, the first male juvenile not to depart, went through the same phase. All of the others were, or might have been, in early pregnancy: it is common for first babies to be lost so early that no sign of the pregnancy ever becomes apparent without a close medical examination; therefore, if confined to females, this behaviour might have been due entirely to the aggressiveness which characterises the first couple of months of pouch-gravidity, rather than being a special adolescent phase. But this could hardly apply to Timmy. He would come in the window, as he had since he first started to wander around on his own, ask for bread in exactly the same manner, then, as my hand approached him, he would suddenly sink his teeth into the hand. The next minute he would be back to normal, acting as if nothing had happened. When I cuffed him, his reaction seemed to be one of astonishment. He didn't seem to associate the cuff with the bite, because he didn't even seem to know that he had bitten me. Nevertheless, I continued to cuff him whenever it happened, even though I knew that, at the time, he couldn't help himself: somehow he had to learn to associate the punishment with the crime, and control that reflex; a possum who bites any living thing that comes into its proximity is not long for this world. Apparently, he was behaving in the same manner with his own kind, and receiving the same sort of aversion therapy, but rather more drastic in its degree: he would go off at night in a certain direction, and we would hear the squawks; he would return later that night or the next, with a considerably proportion of the fur missing from his rump or flank. For several weeks, the plucking of Timmy was an almost nightly ceremony. Fortunately, he too seemed to grow out of the phase, though he remained a singularly bumptious young man.

I have since seen what appeared to be a version of the same thing in another male adolescent; in retrospect, Twiddly may have gone through the same phase, see above, pp. 59 f.

xxiv. Apparently the cat would climb the possum's tree in the daytime, get into its nest and curl up with it. I have no reason to doubt the story. While some cats follow the leonine social model, relating to other cats residing in the same place as to members of the same pride, at least some follow the solitary social model of other large felines such as tigers, preferring the absence of their own kind to their presence and considering them potential rivals: such a cat would be in a similar position to possums - if it wanted a friend, it would have to be a friend of a different species. It would be perfectly possible for such a cat and a possum to find in each other the desired non-cat/non-possum friend: I'm glad those two found each other. In other cases, however, the similarities between cats and possums can preclude such a relationship: just as my dog, Trixie, seemed to like possums because she adored cats, and

considered them some sort of cat variant, so cats and possums can regard each other as potential rivals of their own kind. It all depends on the individual cat and the individual possum. STOP PRESS 2011: When I first wrote this, I was repeating an anecdote told to me, with, I confess, certain inner reservations. However, in 2008 I had my own similar experience. For reasons too complicated to explain, in late 2007 I acquired a very fluffy male ginger kitten named Tenzin. He looked like a cross between a pure bred white Persian and one of the huge, amiable feral ginger tomcats that hang around the fringe of rural areas and national parks. He was, of course, castrated before he could be `adopted', but he is an instance of something recorded in ancient historical records in regard to some human cases. The effect on his psychology was minimal. Almost the only effect castration had on him was that he was unable to produce sperm. Suffice it to say that as an adult he seems to regard my forearms in a manner similar to that in which certain excitable young male dogs regard their human's legs – wives. He grew up to be very much a tomcat, a very large one. He is of course confined to the house, but as a baby in 2007 he was allowed to hang around when the local Newport possums came for their evening handout, usually perching on the top of the open study (my former bedroom) window. He seemed fascinated by them, absolutely riveted by them. He had seen very few other cats since his long-term memory developed, and while he wasn't sure whether he was a possum or they were cats, he strongly suspected they were both the same kind. Perhaps the fact that their coats were the nearest thing he'd ever encountered to his own Persian-like silk helped. The possums tolerated him, apparently regarding him as a harmless baby possum attached to me – perhaps from their viewpoint the ginger colouring, and size, helped. As is the way with cats he very occasionally made an escape to the outside, and one of the first places he headed towards was the part of the roof occupied by possums. By 2008 a particularly sociable young female possum named Squirt had taken to coming down the window and eating her food on the window ledge beside me, sometimes leaning against me. Tenzin was totally besotted by her. He crept closer and closer, then reached out and patted her with his paw to see what she felt like. Being an exceptionally gentle and good natured possum Squirt tolerated this, even when he approached from behind, which normally triggers an aggression or flight reflex. Then he started reaching out and pulling her tail. She clearly didn't like this, but still tolerated it, though starting to carefully position her tail where he couldn't get it, and sometimes her rump against me, as if for protection. I started to take a hand and tried to push him away from her whenever his pestering became too persistent. But as time went on, and he got bigger, his approaches became more and more frequently from the rear, and seemed to take on an amorous note. That was too much even for Squirt. She retreated up the window and started to prefer to eat there. And Tenzin found himself excluded from the room whenever the possums were around.

xxv. There is, of course, the possibility that she inherited it from her father. Her paternity is not certain: Erik must have been somewhere not too far away at the appropriate time; if he was the father, then the marking was almost certainly due to a throw-back to Jenny. However, what Erik's state of health would have been around the time she was conceived is problematic, and the possibility of a wanderer from afar cannot be ruled out.

xxvi. See Note iii.

xxvii. There are some glimmerings of an explanation for this. There seems no doubt that the red patching in males is an hormonal thing, triggered by puberty but starting to show up only a couple of months later. At Newport, at one stage, we had a splendid range lined up for comparison: Clumsy, Dido's son, at around seven months old, with adult genitalia but without any visible red; Timmy, `Miri' 's son, just under a year old, with the red patches just starting to appear on his shoulders; then `Horrible', a mature, though not old possum, with very red shoulders and fur shot through with red down to the waist; Shy Boy, who in other respects looked a little younger than `Horrible', was redder - he seemed to be a relation of the Foxy-Poss creek group, i.e. russet-toned to start off with; finally, there was Old Pink Pig, who, from the front, appeared to be red and cream entirely - all his fur above the waist was very reddish, and the rest shot through with reddish hairs, and between his shoulder blades there was one deep, blood-red patch, old Erik's colouring. He arrived at Newport around 1973 or 1974, already a reddish mature male, and so would have been at least five or six at the time of the comparison, and Horrible (i.e. the undoubted original Horrible), then as later not much smaller, but clearly a lot younger, showed up at around the same time.

The scale, obviously, is no precise guide to age, but if it holds as a general guide, then to be blood red all over Erik must have been over eight when he first showed up at Ingleside - I suspect more - and something like ten or more when he died, a very considerable age for any free ranging possum, and a prodigious age for a male, since their lives as travellers mean they almost invariably succumb to misadventure well before it. The lack of red in his regrowth hair may have been due to the temporary absence or abeyance of the hormones responsible.

Or perhaps had nothing at all to do with it. At Newport, at one point, around 1978, Old Pig, after a night's absence, turned up scalped - or at least shaven. The whole of his forehead was bare, as if it had been shaved for an injection, though I could see no mark, and under his chin there was a conical scab, the sort that seems to develop as a kind of negative of a laniate wound. Who knows? If he really had had his head in a dog's mouth it's a wonder he didn't die of fright. Be that as it may, when the fur on his forehead began to grow back, it was noticeably greyer than the rest of his coat.

In any case, it happened.

xxviii. In some cases, literally off-colour, since a possum's normally pink nose reacts to illness in much the same way as a human's face, paling to a yellowish cream when something goes wrong. This is just as reliable, and just as unreliable, as the similar changes in human complexion - a possum can `go pale' without there being very much amiss with it, or by the same token, when other factors are operating to bring the blood to the head, be very sick indeed without any such sign. For example, the noses of females in season are usually a bright cherry red; there is no way of telling, by that alone, the difference between a pale mating-season nose and the more delicate pink of a possum in good health.

xxix. I had dramatic corroboration of my assessment of his attitude to possums later, at Newport. The window of my room was left open for the cats to go in and out, and, naturally, the possums, once they discovered this, decided to avail themselves of the same convenience. In particular, two of `Pumpkin''s baby boys, Elephant and Piglet, made a habit of spending a lot of time in my room, especially when, as happens with possums no less than humans, they were temporarily out of sorts with their mother. Needless to say, they became special favourites, and Smiley, sensing potential rivals, regarded them with especial distaste.

Yet one night when I was out, one of them, I forget which, appeared on my window sill, and Smiley called my mother loudly. Thinking he wanted the possum removed, my mother moved to oblige, whereupon he backed up and threatened - and she prudently said, `All right, keep your possum.'

No doubt he did want the possum removed, but in the accepted manner, by giving it the food it came for. He had apparently, like at least one other tomcat I've known, developed the same sort of vicarious territoriality as dogs do, defending his owner's property as his own. He did not like possums, but he seemed to have decided that they belonged to me, and it was therefore up to him to protect them in my absence. About the only effective counter I know to domestic predators is a territorial animal of the same species, who regards the wildlife as property, to be protected, not prey, to be pursued, and one way or another keeps his fellows off the premises or thoroughly occupied when on them.

xxx. Above, p. 136. In the course of my travels I in fact encountered two possums which were virtually identical, physically, to Snoopy. On the farthest corner of our road block, considerably further, in possum terms, than the adjacent parts of the neighbouring blocks nearer the house, there was a small house group of Jenny-possums. Not inexplicable: some relation of hers was probably once deported to Ingleside, perhaps to the Chase, and did what suburbanite possums naturally do, returned to a suitable house. It took three days, and caused an enormous amount of nuisance to the poor long-suffering householders to establish that Snoopy was not among that group, or somewhere nearby, or, if she was, she was deliberately avoiding me. Once at Bay View I was waiting for the appearance of a possum I'd heard about which had been behaving rather like Snoopy. The possum duly appeared. She looked very like Snoopy, size, build, everything. I called her and she trotted confidently across the law to my feet, precisely as Snoopy used to do. She obviously recognised me. The closer she came the more like Snoopy she looked. Even the walk was the same. Yet she had all the digits on both hind feet intact, and it turned out that she was a friend of the people in the house next door. A case of mistaken identity on both sides.

xxxi. I must stress that I have deliberately made it impossible to identify any of the houses involved within a group of six or more, both by using a scale which prevents such precise location and by slightly altering the street patterns, to protect both the people and the possums; the only actual houses which might be relocatable from this map are the two houses where Snoopy lived, at Ingleside and Newport. I must also stress that it reflects the situation in 1975. Since that time a great deal of `development' has taken place, and it is very likely that there are no longer possums in some of the locations, whether because the bush has been cleared or because clearance nearby has cut the migration routes for males, isolating the resident females. It is included to give a broad idea of distribution in these sorts of areas, in case any one should be interested.

The distribution pattern was as I have stated, small, isolated, infrequent groups in areas where houses are rarer, with larger, overlapping groups, numbering from six to twenty, in places where there is denser human habitation, but also trees, dropping sharply to none where there are houses but no vegetation. In answer to various replies to advertising, I made excursions outside the area, ultimately to places as far afield as Clareville and Avalon to the north, and to the south to one particular part of Manly Vale, to which there seemed to be a route via Narrabeen Lagoon and the back of Dee Why, where there was a stray possum who did indeed appear to have part of one digit missing - it turned out to be an optical illusion caused by very light colouring on part of the foot. And I saw nothing to conflict with this general distribution pattern.

It may be that this pattern, the increase in size and frequency of groups where there is a commensurate increase in the number of houses, is caused by two factors. Firstly, food: the sort of food available around houses seems to be more concentrated in nutritional value than that available in the bush, and consequently the area can support more possums.

Secondly, the restriction of female, as opposed to male, juvenile migration, caused by continuous clearing and `development' of surrounding land. While there are inbuilt behavioural mechanisms to spread possums as widely as possible, such as the mother-daughter antipathy, a possum, being a pragmatist, will always choose the easier course rather than the harder one. When a female reaches the stage where similarity of habitual routes and a common taste in food, not to mention an attachment to the same nests, brings about an inevitable conflict with her mother, she has a choice of moving away or staying and fighting it out, probably being forced to accept a subordinate social position vis-à-vis her mother's; in areas such as Ingleside, it is easier for, say, Snug to move a little upstream and start a sub-group of her own, rather than tolerate the hostile attentions of Bindi, since there is no lack of facilities or food, and no special danger involved in getting there. In places like Newport, however, there is a limit on the accommodation available - a youngster's scouting expeditions are likely to tell her that upstream, or whatever the equivalent happens to be, the only nests in existence are the well-appointed ones in sheds or roofs, which are already occupied by adult females, even more antagonistic to her than her mother is. And the routes themselves are more difficult and dangerous, and deter her from any longer journeys than absolutely necessary. It is easier for her to tuck herself in somewhere close at hand, and submit to occasional beatings from known females, until she is old enough, and big enough, to start replying in kind.

So much for where the possums are, and the manner of their collocation. But the map means nothing at all in terms of where the possums aren't, save for their absence from totally built-up areas.

There are no implications whatsoever for the absence of possums outside the area indicated. In fact I know that possums do exist in some of the places excluded, from my own spot sorties in answer to calls, and from hearsay, which confirms my own expectations - the area from Bayview to Church Point, for example, looked very much like house-possum country, and I heard of house groups, which sounded remarkably like the ones I know, in that locality.

But even within the area indicated, there are no guarantees about the absence of possums. At the beginning, in an area where sparser human habitation leaves acre upon acre of bush intact, I took no account of that bush, save only for the part of the block adjacent to the house, the margin of Mona Vale Road, and the downstream part of Ku-ring-gai Chase. House possums gravitate to houses if they are displaced, something confirmed by the professional pest exterminators I met, who encountered the same individuals time and again. I was, as a matter of urgency, looking for Snoopy, the consummate house possum. I could not cover the whole area, and there was no point in looking there unless I had special reason to believe she might be there. Nor did I enquire about possums as such, only about Snoopy, or a

possum acting in a conspicuous manner which might be her, unless and until the distribution of groups became relevant. And later, in the higher density areas of Bayview, Mona Vale and Newport, I by-passed obvious possum places in an effort to make up three months, working on what I knew at the time to be the wild assumption that it really was Snoopy I was tracking. It was one of those heart-breaking situations where the time factor forces you to assume a sciolist attitude and act on it, even while you are agonisingly aware of the fallacies of the theory.

xxxii. If I might be permitted a bit of amateur speculation, I would suggest that the cause of this and other apparent discrepancies - gestation period, possible oestrus cycle, age of independence of babies and so forth - about which the books disagree, lies in the degree of variation possible between individuals, the nature and origin of possum groups, and the scope of observations upon which the dicta are based.

Possum groups are essentially family groups, formed by the progressive dispersal of juvenile females. Usually it is only the males who come from afar. In most cases nearly all the possums within a given group are blood relations, and, given the predisposition of males to wander over the areas covered by adjacent groups, there is usually a genetic relationship with the neighbouring groups as well.

There is always a tendency for a group or groups to become isolated, physically, from other possums. In the bush this may occur when fire devastates a large area, or perhaps when a severe flood has a similar effect, leaving open, foodless areas too large to be crossed by males until regrowth occurs. In the suburbs, it occurs when surrounding land is cleared and `developed', or when there is a marked increase in the volume of traffic on roads which the possum route needs to cross. Regardless of where Snoopy did or did not go, I am convinced that the trail I followed across Bayview to Newport marked old migration routes: in days of yore the males would have percolated backwards and forwards from Ingleside to Newport, but now the traffic is one way, and human assisted, a matter of possums taken from more built-up areas and dumped in the bushier areas.

Under these circumstances there is a tendency for groups to become genetically isolated, and inbreed, so that any individual, but heritable aberrations are perpetuated, and gradually become the norm for that group. Twinning seems an obvious case in point - in humans at least, twins tend to `run in the family'. But the range of variation possible in such matters - when I first had reason to take notice of the Newport possums, the difference in these respects between the Jenny and Foxy groups was so great, and so marked, that they could well have been different, but closely related species, save only that they ultimately interbred - suggests to me that most, if not all, the apparent discrepancies are open to the same explanation.

In other words, everyone is probably right, but only insofar as the possums on which the observations are based are concerned.

That's possums. You have to take them as you find them, without any inviolable preconceptions, if you don't want to have the fundaments of your intellectual being shattered at regular intervals.

xxxiii. One of the older books I read stated that female possums were fertile throughout the whole year, while others stated that they were fertile for only limited periods, in spring and autumn. I am reliably informed that the latter, if not wholly accurate, is closer to the truth, and it certainly accords better with my own experience. However, there is a rider: the events from late winter 1978 to autumn 1979 at Newport seems to explain both why `out-of-season' babies are indeed born, and why someone could think that females are fertile throughout the whole year.

In 1978 there were approximately fourteen adult females residing on, or partially on the Newport property (`Pumpkin', Chrissie, Di(do), the precocious Toecutter, Tari, Juni, Battered Baby, Sherry, Spica, Spitfire, `Moto', Soda, `Miri', and an unidentified one who looked like Sherry) with four regular males, Old Pig, Travesty and the two younger males born here, Timmy and Brandy, two older previously established males, Shy Boy and `Horrible' becoming less frequent in their attendance, and the unmistakable white-tipped Elephant, `Pumpkin''s son, apparently based nearby, visiting very occasionally. Of the females, `Moto' was apparently infertile. Of the remainder, four seemed to have lost their babies, one way or another, in 1978, while they were still in the pouch, or shortly thereafter. Toecutter lost hers in the stage where it was out of the pouch in the nest and just starting to make public appearances somewhere around late August; by late November the replacement was in her pouch. Soda similarly appeared to be pouch gravid in late winter 1978, but also lost the baby and was again heavily pouch gravid by November,

appearing with a little girl, Sparklet, on her back on Jan. 11, 1979. Spitfire may have done something similar, since she too was heavily pouch gravid in November, and produced a son, Felix, on Jan. 4, 1979. The revelation, however, came from Juni, Jenny Junior. She apparently mislaid her baby, fathered probably by Timmy (mating seen) in early August, in the wall of the house, when it would have been in and out of the pouch in the nest; it was about a month after this that the ill-fated Dido appeared with two male babies, different in appearance, Jemmy (for Gemellus) and Puggy, see above, Note ii; of the two, Jemmy, who looked very much like Juni's older son Brandy, may have been Juni's, though there is another possible scenario, the other, Puggy, being Toecutter's lost baby. On Aug. 23 Juni proceeded to mate with Pig and immediately thereafter Timmy - and perhaps `Shy Boy' had a turn. Things were happening fast and furiously, with one jumping on the rather dazed looking Juni as soon as the previous one had finished. Juni really was Jenny, Junior. The result was that by Dec. 1 she again had a baby in her pouch, and by early summer there was enough uproar from the vicinity of her nest to demonstrate that her new son, Rumpus, was with us. (STOP PRESS: events from around 2007-2011 suggest that sudden cessation of lactation might sometimes, but not always, trigger oestrus, but that’s just a wild amateur guess.)

The upshot of all this was that `spring' 1978 babies appeared continuously throughout spring 1978 and summer 1979, from Sept. 1, 1978 (`Pumpkin''s boy Macro) until the public arrival of Juni's Rumpus, Feb. 18/19. The authentic autumn baby, Chrissie's little boy Shamus, was already making his presence known in the nest by March 22, though he didn't appear publically until April 17; theoretically, the `spring' baby Rumpus was six months older than Shamus, but in reality he was only two months older, as close as many babies born within the same normal spring or autumn season.

It seems that if a female loses a baby at any time during pouch gravidity or soon thereafter (possibly while she is still lactating), she can come into oestrus and mate again shortly afterwards, in Juni's case at least, approximately two weeks after the loss of the baby. Since babies can be lost at various stages during pouch gravidity, this means that `out-of-season' babies can be born at any time during the year, giving the impression that females remain fertile throughout the year, whereas in fact, under these circumstances, they can become fertile at any time during the year, but do not remain in a state of constant fertility.

But to every rule there is an exception, and apparently nobody told Jenny about this system. She could, and did, at one time, have three babies in thirteen months, discounting the adopted twin.

xxxiv. This baby colourations is something of a mystery, to me at least. Not all babies seem to develop it, though in some cases it may come and go while the baby is still in the pouch outside the nest, before it makes its first public appearance. It could well be vestigial.

But I fail to see its purpose. The lighter colouration makes the baby more conspicuous. It can hardly be intended to make it more conspicuous to other species at the very stage when the baby is most vulnerable to predators such as owls, so it must be intended for their own kind, a placard informing them in block capitals that this possum is too young to know better, and its ill manners should be tolerated.

But how the devil are they supposed to distinguish this colouration? Possums are nocturnal animals. I gather that some other higher species such as dogs and cats have been deemed unable to distinguish colour in any case (though this appears to be changing), and for this mechanism to operate they would have to be able to distinguish the baby colouration from, say, the cream of a small adult possum of the lightest known colour variant. For me, there are only something like three or four nights a year, nights when the full moon coincides with a light cloud cover elsewhere in the sky reflecting its light, on which I can distinguish even the primary colours without artificial lighting. Otherwise it is simply a matter of light colour as opposed to dark colour. And even on the brightest moonlight nights, there is no distinction, for me, between the special baby colouration and the colour of a possum who is one of the lighter greys and favours creamy patches in its facial markings. Granted that possums' night sight is palpably superior to that of humans, it is still not all that much better. This was one of my surprises when I first started sitting beside Mrs. Poss, watching the nocturnal world go by; it is the sense of smell which is most significantly superior to that of humans. Their eyes, bulging out of their heads, with pupils expanded, look enormous, but that's in comparison to the size of the possum, and when you come to think about it, the light collecting surface of an expanded human pupil is not all that much smaller. Quite possibly, on those rare light nights, they may be able to see the distinction - but there are still too many moonless or cloudy nights on which such differentiation would be impossible to make it

worthwhile. In other words, what is the use of baby colouration to a nocturnal animal? One would have thought the other visual signs of babyhood, size and the fluffy `puppy fur', which works the other way, blurring the outline to confuse a predator, would have been far more effective.

As I said, it may be vestigial - there seem to be other vestigial things, no longer appropriate to the conditions under which possums now live, or to their present behaviour patterns, hints that bushy-tails were once something quite different from what they are now. Some bushy-tails are very good at light-adapting their eyes, and some, not necessarily hand-reared ones, are quite amenable to carrying out some of their normal night-time activities during the day, if conditions make it safe and they deem it beneficial. Perhaps they were once diurnal, or at least, like modern cats, adaptable. I simply don't know.

xxxv. In the same way, all Foxy's babies came to `Foxy' as well as their own names, and those who were raised in the tree near the creek on our property also came to different appellations. The hole in the tree is so placed that in order to pass food up to it with the feeding stick, it is necessary to stand directly underneath, out of sight of the hole itself. As a result, I seldom see what I am feeding. Often I am vouchsafed no more than a glimpse of a prehensile paw, or disembodied ear. Now in that sort of situation, where you are serving breakfast in bed to a possum that could well be still asleep, it is necessary to have some sort of unalarming auditorial signal to give the possum warning, before putting the stick up into the nest - otherwise you're likely to scare the possum half to death. You need something like the knock we used for Honey's box - a soft, staccato rap imitating the sound of a relaxed, contented possum grooming. Since I was often unsure, in fact, who I was feeding in the tree - from my angle of vision the tree itself seemed to take the bread - in a moment of facetious desperation I started calling, `Hey, Tree!' So naturally, all the babies raised in that nest came to, `Hey, Tree!' On one occasion I met Spitfire, the then incumbent, a little distance from the tree, at an unusual time of the evening. Like all her predecessors, she used the tree as a part-time nest, living there for a couple of weeks, then absenting herself for about the same time. She was returning from one of these absences, and took fright when she saw me, unable to recognise me out of context, as it were. `Spitfire' and her mother's name, `Sherry', failed to reassure her - nothing worked until, as a last resort, I said, `Hey, Tree!'

xxxvi. It is very difficult to get an accurate idea of the age of adult possums - without dissection. The following observations on size refer to females, since it is difficult to know about the males since the bulk leave home, if only temporarily, as juveniles, and do not return until they have changed so much as to make it difficult to be sure it is the same possum. Jenny's family seem to go through four distinct stages. The baby grows until it is about a year old, the size of a young adult, then there is a kind of pause, with only very slight, very general growth between 1 and somewhere around 3, when they suddenly fill out to full-sized adults. Then they remain the same for years, until one day you suddenly realise that so-and-so is an <u>old</u> possum, usually after something has happened that just tipped it over the edge, illness or injury, or in a female a spate of difficult babies, one after the other. Possums from other families omit the pause between one and three years, continuing to grow evenly, reaching their full size at an earlier age. The retardation in Jenny's family may be due to their lamentable propensity for having their first babies on their backs before they themselves are a year old, then continuing to produce them at a rate of at least two a year for the first few years, i.e. what should be going into the growth of the mother is diverted to the production of babies.

The red colouration in males is no more than a general guide: a male with no red is usually less than a year old, and one with unobtrusive patches just starting to form in the underfur of his shoulders is usually between 7 months and 2 years; a possum with very reddish colouring above the waist, and the rest of the under-coat shot through with gingery colouring is probably getting on. But within that framework, a great deal of variation is possible. For example, of the two subordinate adult males at Newport in 1978, `Horrible' and Shy Boy, Shy Boy had more reddish colouring, but I am fairly certain, on other grounds, that `Horrible' was older. Shy Boy's features suggested that he was connected with a collateral branch of Foxy's family, that is to say, with a reddish tinge to his colouring to start off with.

So all you can really say of an adult possum is that it is young, mature or old. But this is a relative judgment, and how it correlates with exact chronology, with years, is a different matter. What's

happened to the possum within that time affects its growth rate, its appearance and its mental attitude - which in turn governs such things as movements and body signals such as muscle tone. Around Christmas 1974-5 Snoopy looked, acted, and to all intents and purposes, in everything but actual years, was just very slightly younger than her granddaughter Bindi. Both were mature possums, but there was just a slight, perceptible difference. In Snoopy's case this was obviously caused by a combination of factors. Her original debilitation, whatever it was, stunted her initial growth, but after that she led a very easy life from the point of view of food and shelter. And, unlike her kindred at Newport, she produced, and coped with, only one live baby. While she suffered one major injury, and a good many minor ones, later, she was remarkably free from disease and other minor ailments to which the others are subject. While at times she was physically weak, from that point of view, she was always in superb condition.

The same thing happened, to a less dramatic extent, with Battered Baby at Newport. Baby suffered severe injuries when she was a few days out of the pouch, and this seemed to inhibit her initial growth. But the nature of those injuries advertised her plight to the world, specifically the human world. The loss of the ear was not a particularly serious matter. It may or may not have impaired her ability to pick up distant sounds from that side, but in any case it happened early enough in her life for her to learn to compensate for it automatically, and she grew a ruff of fur around the ear-hole itself, giving some protection from dirt and parasites. The loss of the tail was more important - a fair proportion of the leaves of the sort that possums prefer occur at the end of branches too thin for them to walk on, so the only way to reach them is dangling from above, by the hind feet and tail, sometimes, for extra length, by the tail alone. Baby's ability to feed on such leaves was obviously inhibited, particularly when she herself was carrying a heavy baby, so that the added weight made the strain too great for back legs alone in situations which demanded the maintenance of a body plane at angles to the branch to which she was anchored.

Naturally, since this was patently obvious, everyone who either liked possums or was not actively opposed to them took a special interest in Baby. We went out of our way to make sure she got her share of the dinner - and her distinctive appearance meant that she was in no danger of losing her dinner, as some the others may do, because with low light and quick movements it is possible to feed the same possum twice, while a similar one misses out because of the misapprehension that it has already been fed. As I said, she managed to persuade some of the neighbours that it was necessary that she should live in a woodshed near the fenceline of the property. She didn't always stay there - and it is far from impossible that she had persuaded someone else further afield to provide alternative, equally luxurious accommodation. Add to which the fact that she did not produce a live baby until she was 2 years old, and, like her ancestors on the Foxy side of the family seemed to settle for having one a year, rather than two a year (although she took after the Jenny-possums physically, and so was of a size more appropriate to coping with Jenny-cross babies). The upshot was that she was the sleekest, plumpest, healthiest possum in the bunch. With horrible regularity, towards the end of every summer, all the Foxy possums came down with that blight, whatever it is, that causes fur loss on the rump and tail and weakness in the back legs. It seems to be to do with a vitamin A deficiency, presumably connected with the seasonal vegetation situation in their demesne, and perhaps also with a congenital tendency to pancreatic problems in the family - one at least was diagnosed with pancreatic failure, see below, p. 343 - and an hereditary susceptibility to digestive problems, as their habit of chewing each mouthful interminably suggests. But even the big greys who live in the house, Jenny's people, all suffered from what appears to be the same thing, to a lesser degree, at one time or another, save only the very youngest. Not so Baby. She never, to my knowledge, showed any sign of that trouble, and for that matter rarely if at all suffered from the other, more minor complaints such as `conjunctivitis' to which the rest are subject. I saw Baby looking even more battered, particularly after an unusually frenetic mating season, but I never saw her sick, thin, unkempt or worn out, as I did, at one time or another, all the others.

The net result was that, although obviously a mature possum, she looked a lot younger than the females who had had to rough it, not only her real contemporaries, but even, say Spitfire, if you discounted the fact that Baby was larger, on the grounds that Spitfire took after the Foxy line.

xxxvii.. Taking account of all the ifs and ans in the previous note, my impression, for what it is worth, is that `Pumpkin' was just a little too old to be the original Pumpkin, a little too close to Jenny when she first arrived. If she were Jenny's daughter, she ought to have been Jenny's eldest daughter - but

when she showed up Jenny's eldest daughter, Snoopy, was safely ensconced at Ingleside. Big Brat would certainly be a possibility - she was only six months younger than Snoopy, which is nothing at all once a possum is mature. Like so many possums, she did a character reversal as she grew up, so that her soubriquet was sheer slander. From that point of view she would fit, as well as from the point of view of having a known affinity for the positions under the eaves. Her only physical distinction was that the iris of her eyes was a markedly lighter brown than that of the others, something which would have been obscured by the cataracts, and the mistiness which preceded their development.

There is another candidate for the dubious honour, if one lays aside her propensity to answer to `Jenny', which seems to indicate a daughter, taking it as of a piece with the fact that she answered to anything - actually she may have answered to the calling note of the voice, regardless of which particular phoneme served as its medium at the time. We had always woven a highly imaginative fantasy about Jenny. Before we were aware of the possums as individuals, we knew that there was a mother possum living in the roof somewhere, who appeared on odd occasions, complete with a baby on her back. At one time the baby grew and grew and still refused to get off its mother's back, although it was obviously perfectly healthy. The poor mother came battling past the window, night after night, struggling to carry something going on for half her own size. Eventually my father caught the baby, marched it off through what was then bush, and deposited it somewhere a couple of hundred yards away over the creek - that, in our ignorance, seemed quite far enough. Naturally the baby, who must have been, even allowing for gigantism, at least three months old and perfectly capable of looking after itself within its mother's general ambit, came straight back, and was once again on its mother's back the next night. After which we gave up. But we always wondered whether that overly-maternal, long-suffering mother might have been Mrs. Poss, and the obstinate baby Jenny - although my more recent experience suggests that that trick is more often played by a male baby. Nevertheless, the speculation that stolid, bear-like, droll, affectionate, motherly old Mrs. Poss might be the mother of our wild, wayward, brilliant, beautiful Jenny was well-nigh irresistible.

There is no real evidence, but the general connection between the two families does not seem to be in doubt. Without realising the implications of what I was writing, I earlier said that Snoopy, when she matured, began to remind me very much, in looks and character, of old Mrs. Poss. In this scenario, Mrs. Poss would have been her grandmother. Then, too, at a time when `Pumpkin' was frequenting my room, together with her enormous daughter Chrissie, and the putative father, Old Pink Pig, I found myself automatically slipping into addressing them as Mumma Bear, Poppa Bear and Baby Bear. The same general ursine quality, those stubby teddy-bear looks, was always a particular attribute of Mrs. Poss.

The group of banksias where I used to meet Mrs. Poss and her group - all of which by then had come down in a storm - was a reasonable distance by the circuitous human route from the house, but actually on top of a bank on the other side of the drive, directly opposite the eaves under which `Pumpkin' so determinedly planted herself, a few yards away through the trees, by the direct possum route. All Mrs. Poss' tribe would have been familiar with that side of our house at least, and `Pumkin', when she first arrived, did indeed go up that way, through the trees, towards the house where Mrs. Poss had found her new friends. Now Mrs. Poss had a daughter who was used, from the time she was in the pouch, to perching on human shoulders, and considered all that sort of thing quite natural, a daughter who, if the scenario has any basis in fact, would have been Jenny's younger sister, and a contemporary of Snoopy's - Pom.

But the people who knew Mrs. Poss after I left had lost track of both her and Pom, as individuals, some time before the question arose. And `Pumkin' answered to `Pom' no more, and no less, readily than she answered to `Pumpkin' or `Brat' - or indeed `Mumma Bear'. She could have been anyone - a possum belonging to a collateral line of Mrs. Poss' family that we had never met before, although I think the chances are that she was one of those three, Pumpkin, Brat or Pom. In any case, as far as she was concerned, she belonged here, in this place, and with us - and she `always' had done. I suppose that's all that matters.

xxxviii. The Jenny-`Pumpkin' mix-up had one unfortunate result - it obscured the significance of an incident which might otherwise have decided the question of whether mothers ever actively train or teach their babies, as opposed to the babies' learning coincidentally by observing and copying their mothers. My mother saw, one night, as she thought, Jenny, training Elephant. Elephant was planted up a tree, in full view, and Jenny was racing round and round frantically, showing all the signs of a mother possum looking for a lost baby. My mother fell for it, trying to help her, drawing `Jenny''s attention to

Elephant, repeatedly indicating the direction, say, `Look, Jenny - here he is,' something that would almost certainly have worked with a mother genuinely unable to locate her baby, given that the level of communications between us and the whole local group was roughly equivalent to that between humans and dogs or cats. All she got was a disgusted look, `I know that, you fool!', and `Jenny' would continue to `search'. while Elephant continued to freeze, not moving a muscle.

The incident seemed quite clear. The baby was being trained to freeze in a crisis, not moving, no matter what, even if his mother was racing around distraught with anxiety, until the mother actually found him. It connected up very nicely with some of my experiences - Joey's baby games of `hide-and-seek'. Those were initiated by the baby, and I was an unwilling participant - I really couldn't find him. But even if the game was initiated by the baby in this case too, there is little doubt that the mother's participation was in some sense voluntary - if Elephant was obvious to my mother, he would have been quadruply obvious to her, even without my mother's indication of his whereabouts.

But if the female involved was the real Jenny, then the whole thing was probably illusory - Elephant wasn't her baby, and, whatever she was looking for, it probably wasn't him.

For what it is worth, even when we finally sorted out who was who, and who Elephant actually belonged to, it did not dispel my impression that I'd seen him with the real Jenny. With her record for adopting babies, that's by no means as silly as it sounds - if he'd been left alone and she'd stumbled across him, she could easily have taken him in charge temporarily, and Elephant was unlikely to have made any objection. He was always a friendly, gentle, amenable little chap, and if the whole world had volunteered to be mummy that would have suited him down to the ground. So even if the female in question was Jenny, the episode might still have been what it appeared to be. But one simply cannot be sure.

xxxix. See above, Note xxxvi.

xl. One possible explanation would be that the tail, which appeared to be that of a juvenile rather than a baby, was automatically seriously bitten by one of the adults (Twiddy?) who failed to notice the real age of its owner.

xli. In 1988 there was a very good example of what can happen with this. A young creek gentleman called Flame, born with a magnificent white tip on his tail, initially developed the said tail very early, like Juni, and grew enormous ears, like Snoopy. At this point he and his mother suffered a mild attack of the `blight', with the result that what was between the ears and the tail missed out on growing. At about 3-4 months old he was a scaled-up version of the `little donkey' stage which usually belongs in the last few weeks when the baby is out of the pouch in the nest but in the pouch outside.

xlii. Above, Note ix.

xliii. Cf. above, Note xiii.

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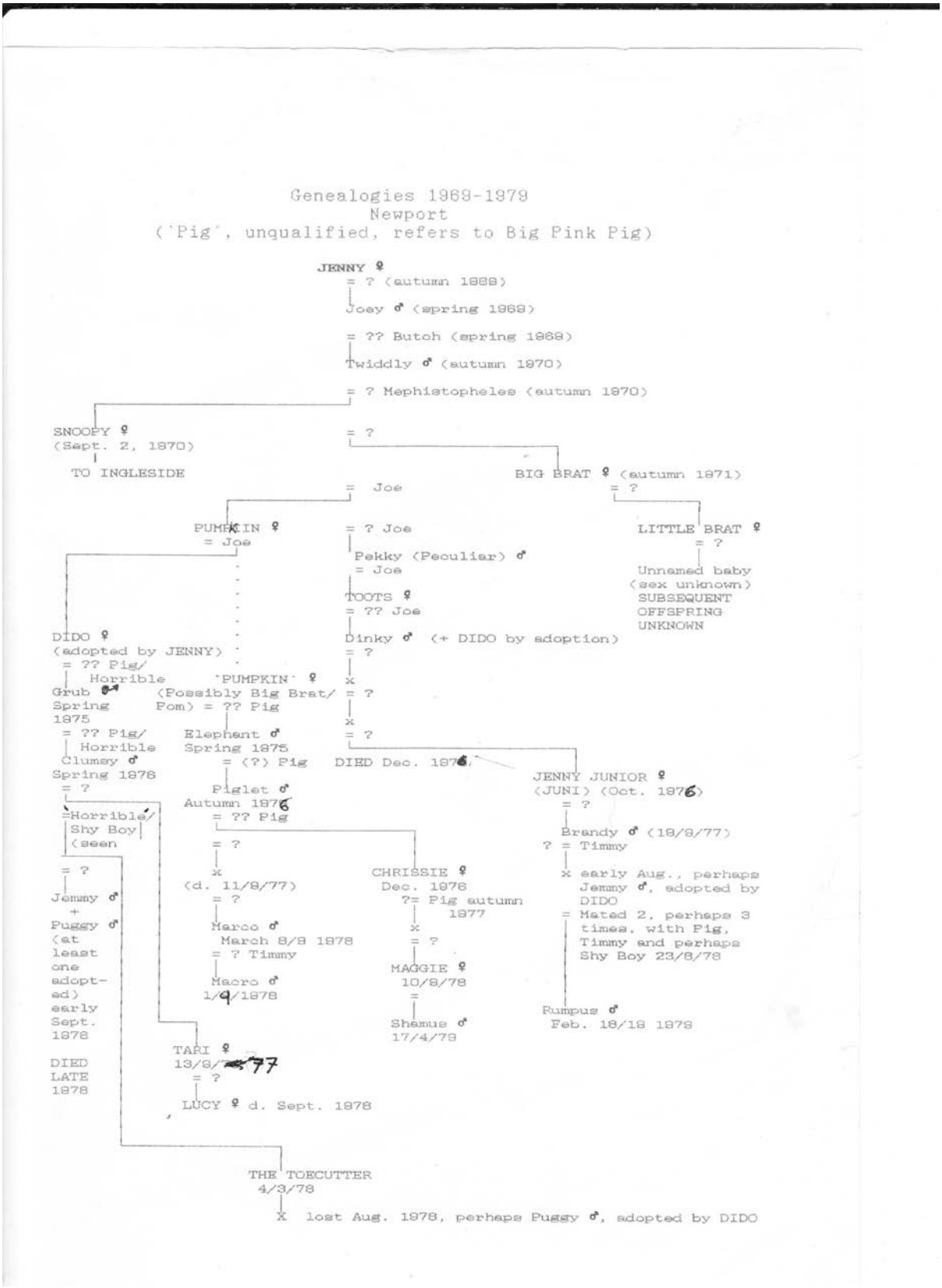
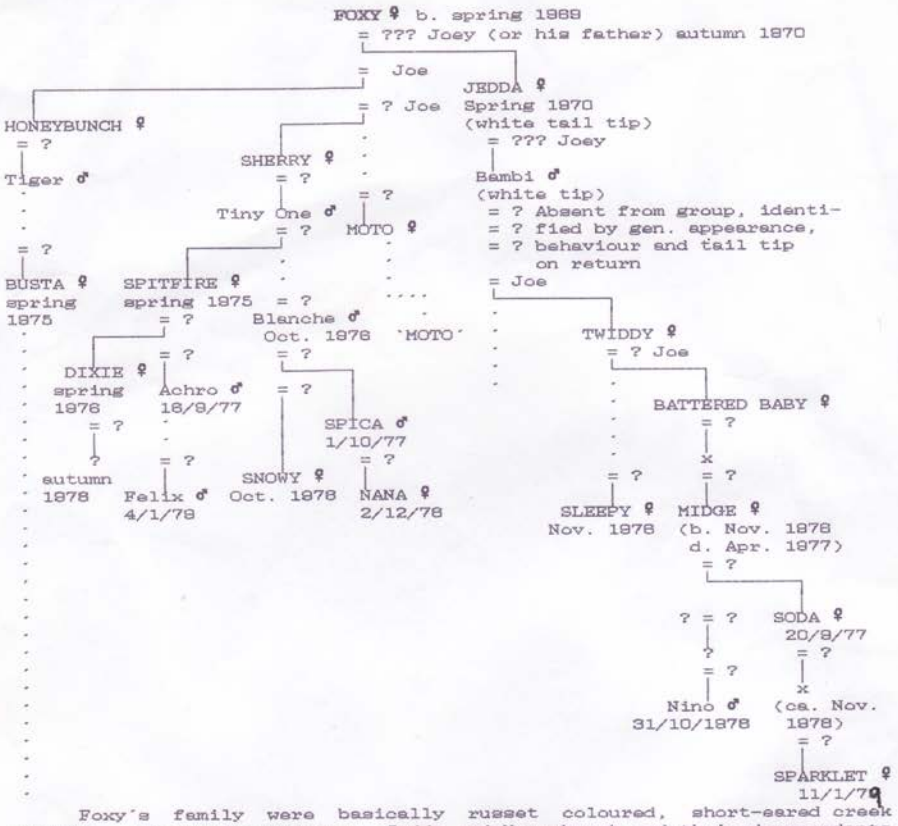

Genealogies 1969-1979
Newport
('Pig', unqualified, refers to Big Pink Pig)
JENNY ♀
= ? (autumn 1968)
Joey ♂ (spring 1969)
= ?? Butch (spring 1968)
Twiddly ♂ (autumn 1970)
= ? Mephistopheles (autumn 1970)
SNOOPY ♀
(Sept. 2, 1970)
TO INGLESIDE
= ?
BIG BRAT ♀ (autumn 1971)
= ?
= Joe
PUMPKIN ♀
= Joe
= ? Joe
Pekky (Peculiar) ♂
= Joe
TOOTS ♀
= ?? Joe
Dinky ♂ (+ DIDO by adoption)
= ?
LITTLE BRAT ♀
= ?
Unnamed baby
(sex unknown)
SUBSEQUENT
OFFSPRING
UNKNOWN
DIDO ♀
(adopted by JENNY)
= ?? Pig/
Horrible
Grub ♂
Spring
1975
= ?? Pig/
Horrible
Clumsy ♂
Spring 1978
= ?
'PUMPKIN' ♀
(Possibly Big Brat/
Pom) = ?? Pig
Elephant ♂
Spring 1975
= (?) Pig
Piglet ♂
Autumn 1976
= ?? Pig
= ?
= ?
= ?
DIED Dec. 1976
JENNY JUNIOR ♀
(JUNI) (Oct. 1976)
= ?
Brandy ♂ (19/8/77)
? = Timmy
x early Aug., perhaps
Jenny ♂, adopted by
DIDO
= Mated 2, perhaps 3
times, with Pig,
Timmy and perhaps
Shy Boy 23/8/78
Rumpus ♂
Feb. 18/19 1978
=Horrible/
Shy Boy
(seen
= ?
Jemmy ♂
+
Puggy ♂
(at
least
one
adopt-
ed)
early
Sept.
1978
DIED
LATE
1978
(d. 11/8/77)
= ?
Marco ♂
March 8/9 1978
= ? Timmy
Macro ♂
1/9/1978
CHRISSIE ♀
Dec. 1976
?= Pig autumn
1977
= ?
MAGGIE ♀
10/8/78
=
Shamus ♂
17/4/79
TARI ♀
13/9/77
= ?
LUCY ♀ d. Sept. 1978
THE TOECUTTER
4/3/78
x lost Aug. 1978, perhaps Puggy ♂, adopted by DIDO

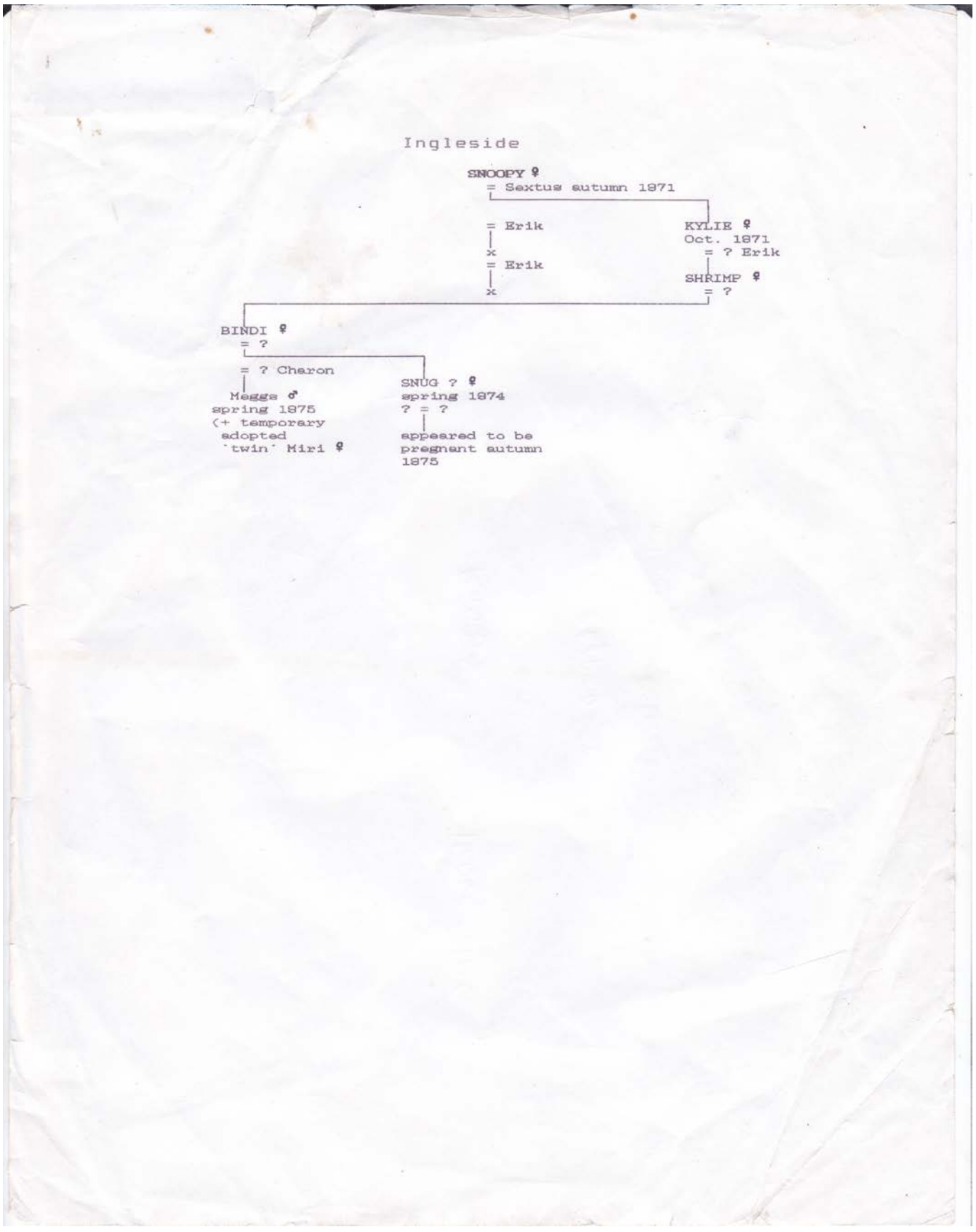


Foxy's family were basically russet coloured, short-eared creek possums. Of her descendants, Jedda and Honeybunch and their desecendants took after the larger Jenny-poss line, while Moto and Sherry and her descendants, though obviously crosses, took more after the Foxy-poss side of the family.

MIRI ♀
Conceived somewhere else in Newport, autumn 1975, transferred to Ingleside, Sept. 1975, then back to Newport, summer 1975/1976.

'MIRI' ♀
= ?
Timmy ♂
Aug. 1976
= ?
CASSIE ♀
b. 18/10/77,
d. 7/11/77
= Timmy March 8/8
1978
?

MRS. POSS ♀
= ? spring 1988
= ?? Grandpa DAUGHTER ♀
POM ♀
= ? Grandpa
Boy ♂


Ingleside
SNOOPY ♀
= Sextus autumn 1871
= Erik
x
= Erik
x
KYLIE ♀
Oct. 1871
= ? Erik
SHRIMP ♀
= ?
BINDI ♀
= ?
= ? Cheron
Meggs ♂
spring 1875
(+ temporary
adopted
'twin' Miri ♀
SNUG ? ♀
spring 1874
? = ?
appeared to be
pregnant autumn
1875

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Proper names in block capitals designate female possums. Proper names in lower case letters designate male possums unless otherwise indicated. Inverted commas indicate that the identification of the possum with the original possum of that name is not certain.

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Photographs

Photographing possums is a singularly difficult operation. Possums are nocturnal animals, they expand their pupils like cats do, but to a much greater degree: when fully dilated the pupil covers nearly the whole surface of the eye.

Photography, apart from infra-red, requires visible light, and possums are lucifugous.

If anyone doubts that a sudden increase in light causes actual physical pain, I suggest that they go outside one night somewhere dark, spend half an hour adjusting their eyes, then get someone to shine a strong torch full in their face. And bear in mind that human pupils do not dilate to anything like the extent that the pupils of animals whose eyes are designed for night vision do. It is not so much the actual intensity of the light – the same amount of light might be tolerable if steady, and gradual adjustment to it is allowed to take place – it is the sudden contrast in light levels, taking place before the adjustment can be made.

Knowing this I will not, repeat <u>not</u>, use even the mildest flash with possums. To do so would gratuitously hurt and distress them. It would be a breach of the “covenant”, to borrow Lorenz’s term for the relationship between man and dog, the unwritten, unspoken agreement upon which our relationship is based.

If a more practical, less sentimental reason is required, then it is this: your subjects take flight, and you don’t see them again for the next week or so.

All this poses a problem, even now, as my recent unsuccessful attempts at videoing possums have shown me. Almost all the following photos were taken by my late mother or myself in the late nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, that is to say, the age before domestic computers, mobile phones or even domestic answering machines. The then state of photographic equipment affordable by non-professionals was as one would expect, and this meant that the only alternative to flash photography was to use low, steady light, the same light as the possums were used to coming into for food or whatever, very fast film – people today would laugh themselves silly at what was considered `very fast’ then -, wide apertures and long exposures. In addition you had to adopt a certain philosophy: if five shots out of twenty were recognisable, you were doing well.

In practice there were difficulties with this approach. The possums I knew and know are used to coming into a low light, which is nevertheless adequate for all human purposes – except photography. It was necessary to supplement the usual light a little, with some steady light source that wasn’t so bright as to put them off entirely – in practice this usually meant a directional light source such as a torch or reading lamp. Where the beam struck the surface there was a circle of light, of greater intensity than the surrounding light, and it “washed out” the part of the picture within its’ ambit. This can give some rather spectacular effects, sometimes even humorously appropriate, like the “Mephistopheles – fire-eater” picture, but more often it resulted in headless, or disembodied possums.

Even stipulating all this it was still a dicey business. The slight increase in light level was obviously perceptible to them, something different, therefore perhaps sinister, enough to put them on their guard.

So you start with a jittery possum, then have to persuade it to stay still, or guess when it is going to stay still of its' own accord, long enough for the antediluvian film to expose. For long exposure is still necessary, usually long enough to mean a double click. And I am pleased to report that the possums went on the alert at the first click – at the second they took off. For "click" is also the noise made by the safety catch, or priming mechanism, of a gun. The net result was blurry pictures of apprehensive possums.

Of course, there are always exceptions: in any group there seems to be at least one individual who is a photographer's dream, often the phlegmatic, easy-going males who are used to coming out early, in the light, to get their dinner before the big girls come and jump on them. My mother got heartily sick of the sight of Mephistopheles through a camera view-finder; I became decidedly bored with similar views of Old Pink Pig, and even a little tired of photographing 'Miri'. It always seems to be the possums you want to photograph that are the hardest to catch – probably you want them for that reason. Mothers with babies are hardest of all. Females, generally, are shyer with humans, and females with young babies are particularly nervous. Baby possums are especially light-sensitive: as with human babies, their eyes develop gradually, and muscular co-ordination involved in such things as light-adjustment and focussing comes only gradually – frequently when the baby first comes out of the pouch you will see it turning its' head apparently aimlessly in response to sounds and smells, gazing vacantly into space, quite obviously unable to focus on what it is trying to see, and they wince and flinch if you accidentally get the torch on their faces. And if the baby shows signs of distress, the mother is all the more likely to depart at the gallop, with the little one clinging on as best it can.

All in all, it is a matter of being profoundly grateful for what you do get, and repining not at all about what you don't.

So please take the following "as you find 'em, or not at all".

Rogues Gallery

Pl. 1 Joe or Jenny – wary

Pl.2 Joey, disliking the light

Pl.3 Joey – Oh, what a big world!

Pl.4 Joe – was he or wasn’t he?

Pl.5 Jenny – impossible to photograph

Pl. 6 Twiddley

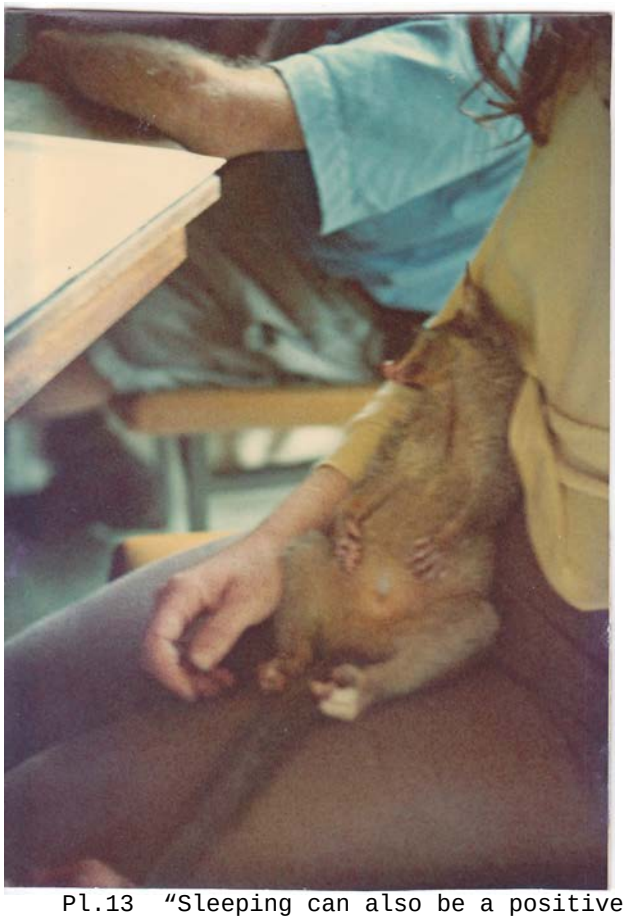
Pl.8 Mephistopheles – fire-eater

Pl. 7 Mephistopheles

Pl.9 Foxy with Sherry

Pl.10 Snoopy, first picture, 18/9/1970

Pl.12 Getting better



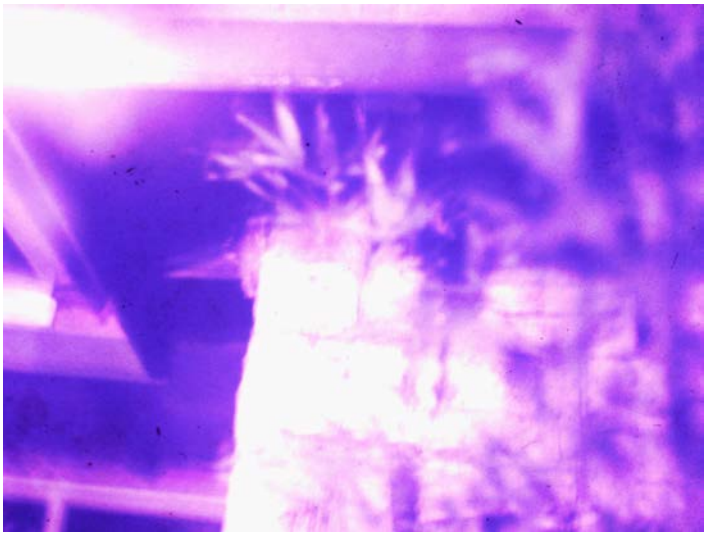
Pl.13 “Sleeping can also be a positive activity”

Pl. 14, Snoopy with baby Kylie

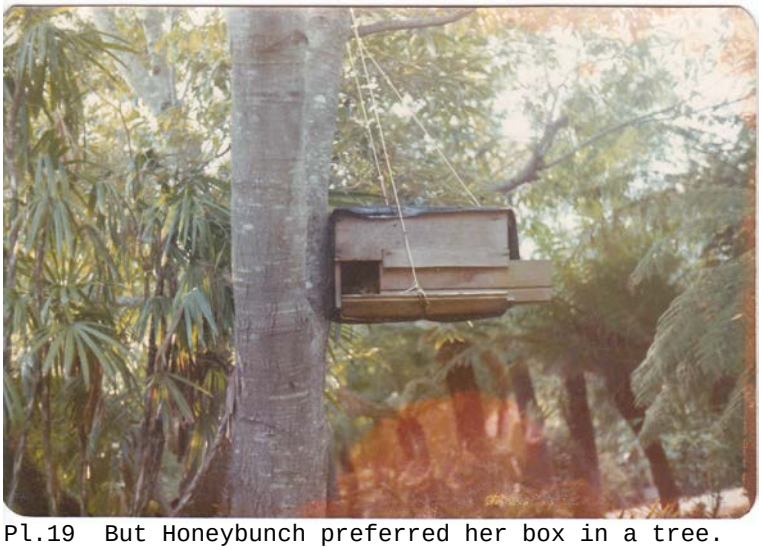
Pl. 15 `Miri', at Newport: Would I feed her immediately, please, and stop messing about with cabbalistic clicking boxes? Sept.30, 1977.

Pl.16. `Miri' at Newport, with Cassie, who at 8 days out of the pouch finds the big bad world very confusing and intimidating. Oct.26, 1977.

Pl.17 A bit less scary at 12 days.

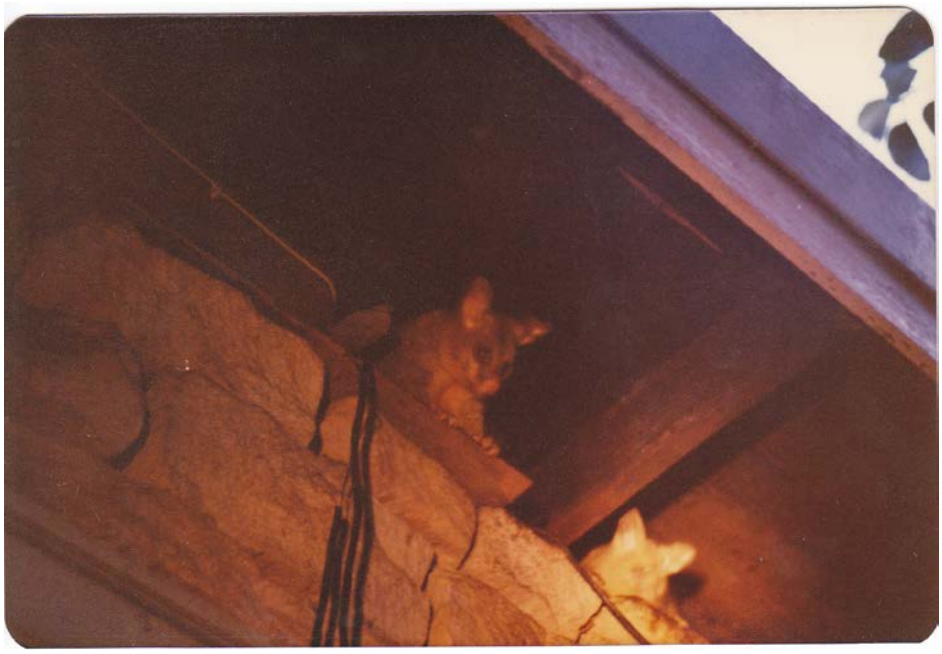


Pl.18 Some possums are happy to live in a box under the eaves, and sometimes bring leaves in to ‘make the place nice’



Pl.19 But Honeybunch preferred her box in a tree.

Pl.20 And Chrissie, like her mother ‘Pumpkin’, preferred her box on my then wardrobe.



Pl.21 ‘Pumpkin’ and Pachy, October 1979

Pl. 22 Old Pig August 21 1977

Pl.23 `Horrible’/Shy Boy, Sheba, 25/8/77

Pl. 24 Battered Baby grown up...

Pl. 25 and doing...

Pl. 26 ...rather well

Pl.27 Local cats known to be harmless, like Smiley, may be ignored as...

Pl.28 ...just part of the local wildlife and environment, like meaningless human objects.

Pl.29 Elephant’s tail, October 1979.