

## **Possum Bridge**

*After the passing of her husband, she was forever haunted by possums.*

*In the dark of the night, they would descend upon the house, deep in the Jarrahwood bush. Shadowy spectres that flit through the treetops. Their small claws scratching on the colorbond as they searched out crevices and cracks into the roofspace.*

*As she lay sleepless in the too-big, half-empty bed she could hear the thud and rattle of their play.*

*She rose and gathered a bathrobe over her shoulders like a shawl and made her way up the groaning timber stairs in her slippers. Torch brandished before her.*

*As she pushed open the hatch, their silhouettes skittered to the edges of the attic. They waited there. Perched on dusty storage chests and blanketed furniture. Eyes gleaming all around her in the murk.*

*She raised the torch and caught one in the beam. Sat upon her husband's old armchair. Staring back, its eyes enormous and round in the torchlight.*

*A tear leaked from the corner of her eye. She wiped it away.*

*"Oh, my dear," she whispered. "Is it really you?"*

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They had set out before first light on the long, winding trip south.

Three sisters. Determined to see for themselves if the rumours were true. That their mother had lost her mind.

When they turned off at a petrol station on the outskirts of the bush, it was a hazy, purple twilight. The dawn but a smudge of ochre on the horizon.

The station looked as old as the trees that surrounded it. With faded white paint blistered and peeling from the timber. The throng of Acacia and Eucalypts had crept up on the firebreaks. Their upper branches leaning over the station like the struts of a firmament. A single buzzing lightpost kept their shadows at bay.

"A doctor's assessment, right." Rachel, the eldest of the three sisters, was talking on the phone. She paced up and down beside the car. Her boots stirring up

dust in the gloom. “And a signed declaration from all three children. Sure.” She had raised her voice for the last part, to make sure they could all hear.

Charlotte was sitting in her wheelchair, hands tucked beneath her armpits for warmth. Trying to ignore Rachel’s pointed glances.

Billie was filling up the tank. The petrol station had only a single bowser. It was ancient. Analogue numbers flitting on the display like a slot machine.

Rachel ended the phone call and turned to her sisters. “Alright so it is possible, but it’s a complicated process,” she said, as if they were all agreed. “We can’t simply seize the estate. Or transfer the money to a trust.”

“Yup,” Billie said. “Generally theft is frowned upon by the courts.”

“But,” Rachel said, ignoring her. “Donny said that it’s best to have a united front. Especially from her children. We’re the primary beneficiaries of her will.”

“Can I ask you something?” Billie said. She hung the nozzle back in its cradle.

“Sure.”

“Have you been planning this for long?”

Rachel stared at her flatly. “Can I ask you something, Billie?”

“Of course.”

“Can you go pay for the damn petrol.”

Billie rolled her entire head. “That didn’t really sound like a question,” she said as she walked away.

“This does seem pretty drastic,” Charlotte said to Rachel.

“It’s the family house,” Rachel replied. “Pa built the place. It was meant to be passed on. Not just for us, but our kids too.”

“All I’m saying is that this is plan B. At best,” Charlotte said. “Let’s talk to her before we make any decisions.”

“Of course you’re taking her side,” Rachel said. She spun on the gravel and began stomping off towards the station.

“What does that mean?” Charlotte called after her.

“As if you don’t know,” Rachel yelled back over her shoulder.

Billie had returned and was sitting on the bonnet of the car, smoking a cigarette. She took a drag and sighed out a plume through her nose.

“Don’t let her get under your skin,” she said, pausing to tap ash off the butt. “She’s just jealous.”

“But why?” Charlotte said.

“You and Ma were always close. When we were kids she spent most of her time with you. Then when Pa got sick, she spent all her time caring for him.”

“I didn’t choose this,” Charlotte said, patting her hands on the armrests of her wheelchair.

Billie waved a hand in appeasement. Cigarette smouldering between her fingertips. “Let’s get to the house first,” she said. “Then we can concentrate on killing each other.”

They drove onward. The houses and fenceposts giving way to trees. The sound of the tyres humming atop the bitumen replaced by the crunch of gravel. Even the music on the radio crackling away into endless static.

The silence between the three of them was somehow louder than it all.

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When was the last time they had all spoken?

Not the children’s birthdays. Nor their own. Not even their father’s funeral.

But the day he died? Yes, that was it. It took parental death to bring them together.

They had sat together on the pine deck of the house. All three sisters and their mother. Watching the hearse roll down the dirt driveway and around the corner. Disappearing behind the thicket of gum trees and banksia.

Inside their husbands were making tea. Or at least such was their excuse to offer their wives a moment of privacy.

Charlotte was sitting in her wheelchair beside their Ma with one arm over her shoulder.

Rachel was the one to break the silence. "I'll make the funeral arrangements," she said.

"Sure," Billie said. She was sitting cross legged on the boards. "Thanks for asking."

Charlotte tuned out their bickering. She laid her head on her Ma's shoulder.

"You okay, Ma?" she mumbled softly.

"Oh yes, dear. Quite alright."

"We're going to miss him huh?"

"What's that dear?"

"Papa," Charlotte said. "We're going to miss him, aren't we?"

"Oh, yes," her mother said. "Sorry, my thoughts were elsewhere."

Her attention had drifted away to the bushland that surrounded the property. Where the ancient gums towered. The leaf canopy stirred by the warm breeze.

"Mama," Charlotte whispered to her and squeezed her hand. But her trance would not be broken.

Charlotte followed her gaze out to the treeline. Perched there on a long twisting branch was a brushtail possum, its grey fur streaked with white. It was perfectly still, staring back with shining black eyes. Rare to see one out in the daylight like that.

Then, as if detecting an intruder to their communion, it turned away. Giving Charlotte's Ma one last look back over its shoulder before it sprung into the brush. Almost beckoning her to follow.

Eventually, so she would.

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When they came to the turnoff, the morning light was breaking over the hills. A dusty, raw auburn through the trees. Caught in the reflection of the creek's surface.

Charlotte could understand why someone would want to retreat out here. If they were looking for beauty. If they were looking for peace.

The Council had built a possum bridge over the road. It was as tall as the high branches of the gum trees. Four maybe five metres. A long, thin strip of rope netting hung between timber beams on either side of the blacktop.

As they passed beneath, the shadow of the netting dappled over the bonnet and windshield.

They drove up the trail slowly. Bobbing up and down over the humps and loose rocks. The house was in a clearing of dry grass. A short wire fence surrounded the property strung between wooden posts. Rachel got out and opened the gate. There was no garage or paved driveway. Just a patch of dirt. Billie veered the car off to the side and pulled on the handbrake.

She was sitting in a fabric fold-out chair, facing the bush. Straw hat pushed back on her head. A knitted blanket draped over her lap. There were honeyeaters out in the trees feeding off the flower buds.

She was so still, Charlotte thought she might have been sleeping. But when she rolled around to the front of the chair, Charlotte saw that she was awake. Watching the birds flutter about the branches.

“Hey Mama,” Charlotte said. She took one of her hands, limp on the armrest, and gave it a squeeze.

She was slow to react. So slow. Her gaze drifting away from the trees and settling on Charlotte’s face and then she smiled. True and joyful, so that the corners of her eyes wrinkled. Charlotte felt a cold trail down her cheek and realised that she was crying.

Rachel and Billie had caught up and walked around to join them.

“My girls,” she said, squeezing Charlotte’s hand back. “You’ve come to see me.”

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They came after sundown. Heralded first by the rustling of leaves in the tall trees. Then the thump and scurry overhead as they leapt from the branches to the roof.

Rachel took a broom outside and beat it along the gutter. Chasing them scampering from one corner to another.

Their mother sat in her chair by the window, hands folded atop the blanket. She touched Charlotte's elbow.

"Tell Rachel to stop that, would you?"

"She's just scaring away the possums, Ma."

"It's quite alright, dear," her mother said. "I don't mind visitors."

There was a scrabble at the window. A brown-furred possum had appeared there. Paws held up to the glass. It tapped on the window, like it was knocking at a door.

"Well hello there, Lilly," Charlotte's mother said.

"You've given them names, Ma," Charlotte said smiling.

"Of course they have names, dear."

"Did you name this one after Aunt Lilly?"

There was a flurry of movement and the possum fled. Through the window they saw Rachel giving chase, her broom brandished like a spear.

"Please tell her to stop, dear."

"Alright, Ma."

When Charlotte rolled her wheelchair out onto the veranda, Rachel was leaning on the broom like a walking stick. Her cheeks red and hair plastered across her forehead.

"Do you see now?" Rachel said. "She's declining. Mentally."

"Let's give it a bit more time."

"It's these damn possums," Rachel said. "They've driven her crazy. You know she's made little beds up for them like they are pets?"

"Well she's always liked having someone or something to take care of. Pa's gone now. I don't see the harm in her adopting some pets."

Rachel scoffed. "The place is infested. They poo all over the veranda."

Charlotte did not want to argue. "We really should all visit more often," she said. "Maybe we could make up a schedule? Take it in turns staying a few nights."

"Or we could bring her to us," Rachel said. "I've been looking into local nursing homes."

"Rachel no," Charlotte said. "She loves this house. It reminds her of Pa."

Rachel muttered something under her breath. Just poorly enough disguised for Charlotte to hear: *You always take her side.*

Charlotte ignored the barb. "Have you talked to Billie about any of this?" she asked.

"No Charlotte, of course I haven't. You'll need to talk to her."

"We need to talk about these things together. All three of us."

"Nothing gets done that way," Rachel said. "Nothing ever gets done unless I step up and do it, just like when Pa died."

"Come of Rachel, that's not fair," Charlotte said. "Billie and I and happy to take on more, but it always feels like you want to make all of the decisions yourself."

Rachel's cheeks somehow burned even redder. She let the broom clatter to the boards and marched away down the patio stairs. There was nowhere for her to storm off, but the bush. Back inside the house, they could hear the snaps of low hanging branches and the crunch of her stomping on the kindling and leaf detritus.

Billie was boiling the kettle to make tea. "Well, she sure showed you," she said to Charlotte.

But Charlotte was looking at her mother sitting in her chair. Hands trembling gently in her lap. Lost in her thoughts and unresponsive to their conversation.

*Was Rachel really so wrong?*

\*

A door hinge creaks somewhere in the night.

Charlotte straightens in her bed. The noise did not rouse her. She had been lying awake for hours.

She shuffled over to the edge of the mattress and pushed herself upright. The wheelchair lay at the foot of her bed, like a faithful dog. She scooted down so that she was sitting beside it and swung her legs out and lowered herself into the chair. She did all this by rote. Her movements like a gymnast's.

As she rolled down the hallway, she could see the front door was open. It swivelled in the breeze, banging against the wall. Billie and Rachel both emerged into the hallway from their rooms. They looked at each other, then to the open door, and back to each other.

"I'll get a torch," Billie said.

They searched the property together. Their torchlight playing over the brush, moths trailing through the beam. The trees took on a ghostly aspect at night. Sallow paperbark and pale mottled gums.

They found their mother all the way out at the end of the driveway. The lattice of the possum bridge overhead. She was facing the treeline, clad in only her nightgown.

A scrabbling came from one of the gums and Billie raised the torch, revealing a brown possum perched in the fork of the tree. Frozen there beneath the light. In its tiny hand something glinted. Gold. Then it scurried up the tree trunk, the dry leaves rattling, and it was gone into the dark.

"That was Gran's engagement ring," Rachel said. She turned toward their mother.

She was gazing down, but not in embarrassment. Her eyes distant and wistful. A faint smile tugging the corner of her mouth. Remembering.

"Ma," Rachel said. "Did you give that ring to a possum? Please tell me that isn't what just happened."

Their mother did not break her daze, but she spoke: "She always wanted it, you know."

"Who?" Rachel asked. "Wanted what? Did you give that ring away, Ma?"

"Lilly, of course. Your Aunty Lilly."

Not even Rachel knew what to say to that.

Their mother continued. "She loved that ring. She had memorised the whole story. Where our Da had bought it. The name of the jeweller. Where the diamond was from. Me? Well I couldn't keep track of those things, didn't have the patience for it."

They stood there in silence for a moment.

"We had an almighty row over who would get to keep it," she went on. "After your Gran died. I won, of course, but Lilly was very bitter. I thought she'd get over it. But I think it still makes her angry. When she thinks about it."

"Ma," Charlotte said gently. "Aunt Lilly died years ago."

Their mother sighed. She finally looked up, eyes glistening. "Yes," she said. "I wish I had given it to her before then."

"Okay," Billie said, taking their mother by the elbow. "Let's get you inside, Ma. It's chilly out."

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Morning comes and they make coffee and drink it together on the veranda.

There was a spot where their Pa used to sit in an old wicker backed chair. He would read the newspaper there and drink hot tea to the sounds of the magpies warbling.

The chair was gone now. The decking where it used to sit was slightly darker, less sun and weather worn, than the rest of the timber. An embroidered sofa cushion had been left there in its place. Along with two bowls, one half-full with water and the other with mushy fruit and flowers. Beside the bowls was an open newspaper. Its pages pinned down beneath two paper weights.

"Someone should really tell her that fruit is bad for them," Rachel said. "Too much sugar for such small animals."

"She left the newspaper out," Billie said. "For a possum."

"Like a litter, I suppose," Rachel said.

They all looked at the tabloid laid out before them.

"I guess," Billie said.

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The next night, the possums do not come. At least not to the house.

It is an omen.

They find her out in the yard again. Sitting on a felled tree trunk, like a bench. The possums are there with her. Rife through the trees. The glimmer of their watchful eyes like twinkling stars in the dark.

The leaves and sticks on the bushfloor crackled liked tinder beneath the wheels of Charlotte's chair. But neither her mother nor the possums were disturbed.

"Mama," Charlotte said to her softly. "What are you doing out here?"

She looked at Charlotte. Her eyes were half-lidded, as if she had not the strength to open them fully. Her arms were folded across her chest, limp at the wrists.

Billie and Rachel had come to the log. Silent in their acknowledgement of the moment. Of its significance. Its inevitability.

They stayed there with her all night, watching the possums. Rachel fetched blankets, but gathered as they were, they did not feel cold. By the time the sun rose, light peeking golden through the thatch of branches, the possums had gone.

And so too had their mother.

They wrapped her in one of the blankets and carried her inside and placed her in her favourite chair.

They waited for the car from the funeral home on the old suede couch. All three of them, side-by-side, like they used to as children. Hands clasped. Billie's head rested upon Rachel's shoulder. Apologies no longer necessary.

Somewhere out there, Charlotte imagined the white-streaked possum was skittering across the rope bridge in the newly kindled morning light. Returning to its treetop hollow in the deep bush.

Only now he was followed by another.

Together crossing the divide.