

The Possum

By Gabriel Bergmoser

Based on a true story.

I didn't think much of the possum when I first saw it. I was walking Ned, heading the usual route from our house down to the park, and I saw a dead possum lying to the left of our driveway, squarely between our house and the neighbour's. Briefly I wondered if I should do something about it, but Ned was trying to smell it so I pulled him clear, figuring that somebody's job was to deal with these things. I went for my walk, forgot all about it, and by the time I got home the possum was gone. I headed up the driveway then something on the front lawn caught my eye.

I pride myself on a neat front lawn. I spend a fair bit of time in the garden. I know it's meaningless, but I like my house to look immaculate. A dead possum lying squarely in the middle of a perfectly even front lawn is not a good look.

I put Ned back inside then walked over to the possum. Frankly I didn't like being so close to it. It had clearly been hit by a car; its head was all flat, with viscous red oozing out of the fur. I looked towards the neighbour's house. It had to be them. Our house was on a corner, so we only had one immediate neighbour.

But then, it could have been a weirdo passer-by. It was best not to assume.

I found the spade out the back. I picked the possum up with it; its crushed head hung off in a way I really disliked. Trying not to look at it, I walked down the driveway and put it back where it had started. That seemed to be the safest option. I hosed off the spade, scrubbed my hands with disinfectant just in case, and went inside.

The next morning, I stepped outside to go to work when a smell hit me, a pungent, rotting, horrible smell. I looked down and saw that I was about to stand on a dead possum, lying across my wife's new doormat. I didn't scream, although I felt briefly like doing so. I stepped back, considering. This was no passer-by.

I got the spade out again and, glad my wife was asleep, moved the possum. This time, however, I crouched at the bottom of the neighbour's driveway. I waited until I was sure there was no movement, that all the blinds were closed, then I hurried up and deposited it on their overgrown front lawn. Honestly, it didn't look that out of place. I ran back home, returned the spade to the shed, washed my hands and left.

That evening I returned home to find my wife deeply upset. She had gone out to walk Ned and stepped on the possum, back on our doorstep. She demanded to know who would do such a thing. I couldn't answer. She had moved it around the side of the house, but demanded that I bury it as soon as I could. I assured her I would deal with it straight away.

Instead, I took it straight up to the neighbour's front doorstep and left it there. We would see how they liked it.

I was ready for a return of the possum, but it didn't come. They seemed to have moved on. Walking Ned, I would deliberately slow down outside their house, but there was no sign of any dead marsupials or scheming neighbours. Satisfied, I decided to let it go. Some people were odd and did odd things. Sooner or later, however, cooler heads prevailed. Somebody would have buried the thing.

One afternoon, I took a load of our washing to the laundry. I lifted the lid of the machine and was surprised to see there were already clothes in there. I tend to be fairly diligent about hanging things out before mildew sets in and I'm more on top of the washing than my wife, so I wasn't quite sure to make of it. Until I saw the congealed blood. Until I inhaled. Until I realised that the dead possum had been left in my washing machine.

I got the spade, but it was too wide and awkward to get in there without smashing up the stupid animal further. I was forced to pull on rubber gloves and drag the horrible thing out, soft and stinking as it was. I put it in a plastic bag. I marched around to the neighbour's house and up to the front door. I went to knock. Then I hesitated. The lawn and the doorstep had been far enough. But they had brought the thing into my house. These were not rational people.

So I went around the side of the house. I listened, but there was no sound from within. I found a window and pushed it up. It slid up smoothly. I emptied the bag through the window and ran. At home, I scrubbed out the washing machine with all the disinfectant I had and even after that decided to take our clothes to the laundrette.

My wife was out with friends that night, so I had the house to myself. I quite enjoyed my solitude, and was looking forward to a glass of wine and some television before bed. Ned and I watched a few episodes of some forgettable show before I brushed my teeth and headed to my room. I had stayed up somewhat later than I intended and had work the next day. I got under the covers and put my head against the pillow. I frowned and re-adjusted. The pillow seemed uneven and lumpy I reached up, went to move it, and as I did I felt the unmistakable shape through the sticky fabric.

I ran outside. I was hyperventilating. How had they done this? *How?* This went beyond slipping it through a window. They had entered my bedroom, where my wife and I slept. I

found my phone and considered calling the police. But I stopped myself. Whoever was doing this, they clearly wanted to break me. The police arriving would be a victory for them, and besides, it was an easy enough thing to deny, planting a dead possum about a neighbour's house. No, I had to be smarter than that.

I grabbed my pillow case and its offending contents and I crept next door. The house was as still and silent as it always was. Everybody who hadn't found a dead possum in their bed was sleeping sound. I grabbed the top of the case between my teeth. It was heavy, but I had a good hold. I shimmied up the drain pipe and on to the roof. My footfalls were usually heavy but I did my best to move quietly. I headed for their chimney and dropped the case through. I heard the soft, muffled thump. I hoped it was already loaded with wood and they missed the pillow case, somehow. I hoped they stunk out their whole house with mouldy marsupial and were forced to move. I had had quite enough of these people.

Days passed. I was half ready for a visit from the police, or else an aggressive knock at the front door. It never came. I had led myself believe the situation was over before, so I wasn't much inclined to let my guard down, but every night went by and I slept soundly in my new sheets with no sign of any possums.

Then one morning I got into the shower. I turned on the hot water. It sputtered brown. This had happened once before, when the plumbing wasn't working. I didn't much like the idea of repeating that scenario. I turned the water up. The pressure wasn't any better and what came out was still brown. When it came out. Some of the water seemed to be sticking in the tiny holes in the showerhead. I looked a little closer. Some splattered in my face. It smelt odd. On closer inspection it seemed thicker than water. And more red than brown.

My heart sped up. I backed away. I reached for the showerhead then stopped. I was losing it. This wasn't possible. I turned off the water, and on again. The same. I was shaking. I wanted to throw up. Instead, I grabbed a hold of the shower head and pulled. It didn't budge. I put one foot against the wall and pulled harder. I yelled out. I kept pulling until finally it wrenched clear of the wall and thick, glugging fluid poured from the hole, followed by a mess of bedraggled fur and staring, flattened eyes.

I screamed.

Naked, I walked out the front door, the possum in hand. I could see people staring at me. I didn't care. Stumbling, I walked up the front driveway of the neighbour's house. I heard people calling out to me. Somebody mentioned police. I ignored them. I reached the front door and knocked. Nobody answered. I knocked and knocked and I started screaming. I could sense,

vaguely, a gathered crowd behind me. I ignored them. I tried to open the door. It was locked. I moved back and slammed, shoulder first, into the door. It hurt, but nothing budged. I ran it again and again until my shoulder was bruised and bleeding. One more time and the door caved in. I staggered into the house. I raised the possum and yelled for my neighbour to come and face me. I threw the thing at their plain white walls. I picked it up and smeared it across the floor, leaving streaks of brown and yellow. I was in the living area now. Or at least, it seemed to be the living area. There was nothing here that indicated as much. In fact, there was nothing here that indicated anything. My breathing slowed. I walked into the next room. And the next.

The house was empty and unfurnished.

The police came not long after. I was arrested for vandalism and indecent exposure. The possum was taken as evidence. I sat in silence at the station, wrapped in a blanket. The landlord of the empty house wanted to press charges. He claimed it would be much harder to find a tenant after a man broke in and smeared rotten possum juice about the place. There wasn't much I could say to that. I didn't want them to think I was crazy.

There was a fine but I was allowed home that night. My wife was concerned. She had many questions. I couldn't answer them. I told her I was tired and wanted to go to bed. We did. I knew she was awake, worrying, but soon her breathing steadied and she started snoring. Ned had curled up at our feet. Everything was peaceful and normal.

I didn't sleep. I just lay there and waited.