

DOZER

Written By: Jutta Goetze. C. 1995.

She drove too fast for gravel. Through a valley of interminable trees. It was like a Coolgardie safe here, cooled by damp embankments of a creek. Gums, grey-barked, deformed, leaned away from the road, a tunnel blasted by wind. A spatter of leaves was hurled at the windscreen, trees swayed. In the gap they made, the hills could be seen, close and defined on the rain-cleared air. The yellows of grass were deepened by moisture that the north wind had already begun to steal. The distance beckoned her. She drove faster. She was somnambulistic, her mouth a grim line, all joy squeezed out, a perpetual droop of sadness about her eyes. Someone haunted, on the run. A recluse, living here, in the bush. As far away as she could.

The car broke out of the shade. Dust on the surface of the road rose behind, fine, talcum powder white - a veil. She saw the black shape ahead. A casualty of some other car that had driven too fast, had ploughed through a life and obliterated it. She slowed her car, nearing the corpse. The wombat was perfectly preserved, seemingly unscathed. On its back, undignified, feet stretched up. A female, pelt tattered, it lay in heavy, stiffened sleep. Weighted to the earth by death. The woman remembered a scrap of knowledge she had once read. She stopped, moved from the car to the wombat, squatted beside it. A blow-fly circled the dulled eyes. There was no wound she could see, no smell - it was only a few hours dead.

The animal's pouch was lax in death. The woman pushed her hand into it. Her fingers encountered the bean-shaped foetus in the folds of the moist skin. It was the size of a large peach. She pulled it from the milkless teat, careful not to tear, and held it, pink and whole, in her hands. It moved, grub-like, reacting to the light of the sun and her unfamiliar hand. It swung its head from side to side, sucking in air, in a soundless search for its mother. Torn from shelter, wrested from death. Tight skin stretched translucent across the bluish bruise of eyes. Furless. Ears fused to its head. Large head. Its clasping feet were like the hands of a young monkey, the claws sickle shaped. Wrinkled skin of belly. Its mouth, joined at the outer edges, was a small, closed circle. It was silent in its hunger, stressed by unprecedented fear. The woman was repelled by its ugly vulnerability. At the same time it stirred something sleeping in her.

She stood in the deserted road, heard the tickering of her car displacing heat. A clicking pulsed in open spaces, cricket castanets, quick-beat of the hills. Ahead of her, behind her, the road ran on into more trees, more hills, blue haze. The woman could feel the waiting stillness. For a moment she hesitated. She thought about putting back what she had found, leaving it to be dried by the wind, eaten by hunger, a small, blind death that had no significance and no effect. I can't take you. I can't rear you. I have nothing left to give. But she felt its heart, the whisper of it against her hand. She was surprised that something so small could make her feel pity and care. So she curled her fingers about it. To protect it. Wrapped it in a rag and put it to her chest to lend it her body's warmth. Gently. Then she drove on.

The woman's house was wreathed in vines. Small and dark. She had lived here a year now, intending to stay only a few months. She wanted to forget. She couldn't. The house protected her. Gave her a sense of place. It was built on cleared, scarred land in the otherwise untouched bush. The vines blocked out the sun. But always, as she paced from room to room, she carried the insistent chatter of a child's voice with her. She heard him talk to her every minute of every day. There never was a child, here. Nothing anywhere to say he had been. Cold ash lay in the fire-place, the acrid smell of wood-smoke clung to corners with dust. No heat. No glow. No-one to warm their hands.

She lit the fire. A small spark shot up and wood spat and cracked. Flames quickly rose. Unsure, she sewed a blanket into something like a mother's pouch - warm, dark place for the wombat to hide in. A safe place. She hooked the pouch on a hanger on the back of a chair, placed it close to the fire. Heated a brick, covered it, and put it inside. Not wanting to crush the wombat, or frighten it any further, she wrapped it in old flannel resembling the nappies she had thrown away. For hours after, her hand sought the wombat's nakedness beneath the swathes. It was warm. And alive. It had to stay alive.

Calls to animal shelters and the vet followed, calls to anyone she thought might know how to keep something so small alive. She was not sure if the wombat could digest cow's milk. It couldn't. But a weak mixture of soy, or evaporated milk would make do until she could buy the proper, low lactose milk. She fed it twisting a cloth that dripped warmed milk into its mouth. Small feeds, but often, because the wombat was no longer attached to the constant stream of its own mother's milk. She encouraged it to urinate. Dehydrated and stressed, it could not, so she rubbed its belly delicately, briefly. The cherry-pip knob told her the wombat was male. She kept him dry, clean. The woman was his mother now. She felt awkward, uncertain and afraid.

On that first night she sat for hours, watching the pouch on the chair. The flames in the grate behind made the room jump out of its shadows. Ceiling wood creaked, expanding in the warmth. The house yawned and sighed. Suddenly the woman felt heavy with intruding grief. It lay rocklike within her. She remembered the slight weight of her baby, wet with her blood, placed on her belly. She remembered the intense, centred warmth. The first sound. The exact shape of the baby's head when later she held him, rounded, moulded soft with wisps of hair. Breathing in his aura and scent. Feeling the enormity of emotion he drew from her. Then seeing his first smile and the focus of his eyes upon her, she felt the purity of joy. But it had been torn away. Her child had died.

The woman sat immobilised. A year had passed yet still she could not understand. Shallow breath. If she didn't move the pain would recede. If she weren't alive she wouldn't feel. But then the tiny being in the pouch stirred and numbly, the woman stood and bent and dripped new milk into his circle mouth. She found herself taking him up, holding him close, rocking him. Speaking to him with soft words, soothing him, soothing herself. She found it hard to let him go.

She fed him two hourly. The baby hiccupped and she massaged him. His skin chafed in the dryness of the artificial womb and she rubbed him with oil. She sterilised his nappies as she would for a baby. Gradually the time span between feeds lengthened. She was watchful, remaining near him. She spent long nights in fitful sleep, waking to

feed him or to place more wood into the flames. She continued to hold him as often as she could, stroking him. He needed touch, breathing, heartbeat. Deprived of his mother, he needed to be held and having no option, the woman held him, to replace what he had lost. He stayed curled in the warmth she gave and did not emit a sound. He, the woman realised, was replacing what she had lost.

The weather changed. The sun retreated, the sky darkened to a deeper, more intense blue. The air thickened with autumn's heaviness and smoke and mist. Yellows and reds of European trees that stood loners in the bush flared brightly, then disappeared. The woman stayed at her window and watched the falling leaves spin. The weakened sun drew spider web lines of life and age around the corners of her eyes. She felt the cold. It stood in the air like a wraith and brought a redness out beneath the pores of her cheeks. She could smell winter coming. Fungi, beige and brown-topped toadstools swelled out of the dark moisture of rotting leaves. Bellbird song hung like dew in the trees, the currawong's call peeled off the mountains. The first frosts blackened leaves; the rains that followed gave the earth a new skin, a pucker of goose-bump green.

Rain turned to sleet, turned to snow, and silence and cloud descended. The world was grey and white and moisture streaked.

In his pouch the wombat slept and suckled and grew. His eyes opened. Whiskers, eye-lashes sprouted. A tuft of faint, delicate fur shaded his ears. The ears unfolded, pixie shaped, too big for his head. The shadow of fur spread across his body, became a sleek, cropped chocolate brown, pink skin glimmering beneath. His nose lengthened, rodent shaped. His lips separated fully, his lower teeth began to grow.

The sum of the parts of him were ungainly and out of proportion. He slept on his back now, his shape discernible, moving about under the material of the pouch. A clawed, pink-pad paw occasionally emerged from the opening, lying languid in sleep. His nose, pink still, snuffled in readiness for his feeds. The woman began to mix grass with roots and dirt still attached, apple, carrot, rolled oats, and a little yoghurt in with his milk.

He began to watch her as she moved about the room, his eye to the opening of the pouch, keen and inquisitive. His first sound to her was a soft huh huh expulsion of breath, calling out his uneasiness to her when she left the room. The woman returned. She felt the unfamiliar pull of a smile at the corners of her mouth and heart. She touched him. The ever-watchful eye withdrew. She waited. The eye reappeared, then his nose, his broadening forehead, a paw. He remained still as she strafed her hand across his fur. He butted her hand. And rolled out onto the floor, where he regarded her and the room with surprised uncertainty. Then he moved to her and stayed close.

Wherever she walked, he remained at her heels. At first only a small portion of each room was shyly inspected, and only if she were there. Even then he remained alert, ready to run. He was frightened by any sudden movement or noise. If he wandered too far and lost sight of her and realised, he would give a high, loud call that rose to the level of a screech, anguished. It would repeat, and he would gallop to find her or return to the ever safe pouch. Then, feeling secure

again, he would re-emerge to nip her on the foot or pull at her shoelaces.

As his confidence grew, he became insistent on being shown more of the world to which she had brought him. It was too cold to take him outside, so she shared her house with him.

He made her laugh. And soon developed an ever determined look in his eye. He had a bulldozer gait as he walked his habitual paths about her house, the route he took was always the most direct. The woman found a name for him. It came easily. In response to his undeterred, stubborn nature. Dozer. Because of his powerful shoulders and stamina and perseverance.

Dozer slept in her hands. He slept on his back in her arms. Or curled around her neck, stretched out on the sofa, tucked in the bean-bag sucking his hind leg. He slept anywhere, everywhere, mainly during the day. And thumped through the night. Explored, cavorted, inevitably wanting his human mother for company.

A close bond had begun to grow between them. He understood her, she understood him. He knew how to gain her attention, he had a language of sounds and nips and nudges that told her of his wants. He gambolled along the hall, nosed through her possessions. Pushed his head against furniture. Sharpened his claws on carpet shreds, scratched at doors. He chewed chair-legs, table legs, bedposts and anything else made of wood. Sometimes chairs collapsed. He discovered the pantry and left trails of flour. She found a puddle of molasses and traced the incriminating stickiness he'd spread lavishly through her house back to her bed - where he was peacefully curled.

He abandoned the pouch for longer stretches of time, then he left it permanently. He furtively chose cupboards and dark corners to deposit his small messages. But he always returned to her, and to the safety she had created for him.

Outside, a re-emerging sun began to burn away the snow-line, dissipating the fog. Yellow clouds of wattle drifted across the face of the bush. Exploding stars, the bright colours of parakeets and lorikeets, flashed through the trees. The air vibrated with their calls. Myriad roots wove through the soil, filling with moisture and growth. The woman opened the windows and doors of her house, she felt colour return to her skin, and more acutely felt the desire to live. The north wind returned, making her restless. With it the scents of seeding grass rose in warm breaths; the grass dried and became once again a bleached, dusty animal's pelt.

The wombat no longer looked like a suckling pig. He began to reject the milk she offered. His teeth protruded in a buck-toothed smile, his nose had flattened out. His ears now seemed too small for his massive head, a head that was set squarely on a short, strong neck, a head seemingly too large for his body. He was thick-set, low-slung.

He had been with her a year now. His urge to explore, his need to dig, to wander, had grown as he had grown. She took him outside. At first he was nervous, breathing hard, rushing about. She remained with him, talking to him like an old friend, reassuring him, showing him back to the house, where it was safe.

He soon grew to know her garden and the paths that led to the bush

beyond. They walked together in the late afternoons, along tracks other wombats had trodden, through undergrowth and feather ferns. The wombat discovered hollow logs and forest grasses, earth to dig. He forged into disused burrows to explore, excavate, pressing his broad back into the damp, earthen roof, tunnelling, scraping, shaping.

The distance between them grew. The space between the wombat and her heels, where he had remained close for so long, widened. The times he stayed away from her lengthened. She would return to her house and sit reading in the half dark listening for sounds of him. She left the back door open for him. Felt the empty space, the familiar tug of pain. But always the wombat would return, in the early hours of the coming day.

She knew he would eventually leave her. She knew what she had to do. To undo touch, unravel the threads of communication that tied them. Teach him alertness, aloofness, wariness. Give him distrust for human beings. Make him rely on his instincts and not on her. He had to learn to fear, to survive. And she had to let go. There was nothing else she could do. He was a wild thing. The woman accepted that, knew that she too needed to leave.

She built an enclosure with a small, straw-filled shed and placed him inside. She closed the door of her house to the wombat.

He stood on his hind legs and cried for her. He tried to climb out and get to her. Tried to dig his way back. But she had been prepared for that. The fence-wire was buried deep. She stood and listened to his calls, out of his sight. She cried too.

At first she returned to sit with him. With her near, he explored the mounds and boundaries of the compound. He turned circles on his shoulders in play around her. Jumped into the air on all fours, his lips drawn back in a wombat-grin. Sure of her, he ambled off. Began to dig, his attention fixed on the ground and the grass, the wood of fallen logs, not on her.

When he fell asleep she left.

She returned less frequently, watching him from a distance, seeing that he minded his aloneness less. She placed food in the enclosure during the day while he slept. Gradually he began to forget her. She knew he was no longer tame when he ran from the sounds of her approach.

One day the woman opened the gate of the enclosure. She watched the wombat walk down the path they had walked together. The familiar barrel shape diminished, his fur dark against the evening light. He nudged through the long grasses, stopping to graze. The quiet bush was his. Awaiting him. The moon rose clear of the trees. A night jar called. Bats ticked in the air, timing time. The woman felt a deep sense of release. She could hear the familiar snuffling of the wombat recede. No other sound filled the space. Once he blinked back at her through the gloom. She thought he saw or scented her. But he gave no indication. Then he turned, and was gone.

The woman remained a while, breathing in the sounds and silences and the warmth of the night. She finally turned. Now she too could return.