

Possums in the Roof

Jutta Goetze

The living room was dark, the couch big, comfortable. I could wriggle into it like a little animal into its nest. There was a light on in the kitchen; it made a rectangular edge that cut into the womb of darkness that was the living room.

The house was quiet. Until a blowfly, agitated, hit into the walls and ceiling and the naked light of the kitchen bulb. With that sudden sound I became aware of other sounds, the many night sounds. The roof creaked in the wind, wind running ahead of rain, taking the leaves and branches and scratching them against the house. It played in the chimes, the bells strung on the verandah, its toys, and it made a door moan somewhere inside the house. The wind was a presence about the house, towering in the night, pressing down.

There was a bird, a wooden seagull fastened to the beam of wood that separated the kitchen from the living room. It hung on a fishing line and when you pulled that, the bird could fly with slow moving wings, graceful and silent, going nowhere. My mother had pinned it there.

Sometimes I imagined the bird was free of its string. Sometimes I could see it fly about the kitchen, gliding past the humming fridge, reflecting in the window, orange painted beak tapping on the door. The kitchen became fields and hills, the bird would see the earth-mud mirrors that had been scooped out of the land and tree-fringed rivers winding across the world. I was on the bird's back; I was the bird itself and could see what it saw. See suddenly the cracked linoleum and the shabby dresser. Head for the small opening in the window. But I couldn't get out. So I would return to the fishing line tether, my flight stilled. I would become Jenny again and Jenny sits in her corner of the sofa looking at the bird.

My mother found me there, my legs tucked up, my chin on my arms. She hadn't been sleeping; she wasn't dressed for sleep, though it was late. She stood looking at me and sat down beside me.

I can't remember how she started to say what she did. She was silent for a long time as though she needed to find words – the right words. When she had found them I only understood a little of what she meant. Then.

She talked about life here and about the times when we were born, Jenny, Katie and Al, and we were little children in her care. I knew all those stories, she had told them before, savouring memories that were precious. We would sit and listen, giggling at the things we had done, knowing we were important to her or she wouldn't be telling the stories she did. About the time Mum had to rescue Al from a charging ram, how she rapped that ram sharply on the nose before she swept Al out of the way. About the time Katie fell into the creek and when Jenny ran away from home.

I knew those stories, but I hadn't heard the tone she was using now. Sad tone. I had never heard the silence in the long pauses between the words. It was new to me to listen to silence and find meaning there.

As she talked I began to realise why she cried all those times I had seen her cry. Our mother cried a lot. We were used to it. We thought it was because we had been bad and she was sorry she could not teach us otherwise. I didn't think that now. She cried because she was unhappy and couldn't change that. She didn't know any more how to find happiness or even what it was. Don't we make you happy, Mum?

She said she felt like a bird that was in a cage and couldn't get out. The bird had forgotten how to fly. It remembered the sensation of flight, it remembered the freedom, but it could not move its wings. I looked to the wooden bird in the corner of the kitchen. The night wind had slipped in through the opened window. The bird moved slightly, quivered. My mother sat for a long time and I kept looking at the bird.

She told me she was leaving. I didn't think she could do that, just go away. No one else's mother did that. She was not any one else's mother, she said. She looked at me when she said that, she wanted me to understand who she was. I looked back at her, but I didn't see. I felt as though someone had ripped away the sofa I was sitting on, had stolen the walls, the house around me. I felt the wind touch me. It was suddenly very cold and very dark and I was scared.

I think I told her we wouldn't be bad any more. I wouldn't run away again – if she didn't. I bargained with her. I would make sure the others wouldn't be bad either. Then she wouldn't have to worry, she wouldn't have to cry again.

She smiled sadly. The shake of her head said no. It was too late for that. It wasn't that, anyway. We weren't bad; her children could never be bad. That is why she could leave us. She wasn't afraid for us. But she was afraid for our father. If we stayed here with him, he would be all right. He would have us to care for. And we would need him. People can't live in isolation. They need to be needed. Families are good that way, they put people together in the same house, she said. I asked her, if that was true, why was she going?

She had to find something out. She didn't tell me what it was. Perhaps she didn't know. She asked me if I understood. I shook my head. I would some day, she said. When I was older. Maybe not now, but I would. She looked at me again; she had been looking at her hands. She looked at me for a long while.

I leaned my head against her arm. I did that when I was very tired or feeling little. I remember the smell of her perfume, cool and warm, mingled with the sensation of blue, not a colour but a feeling. And the musk of cigarette smoke. It was her smell, in her clothes, her hair, her skin; her chest rose and fell as she breathed, her arm too. She moved it to put around me and comfort me. It wasn't so dark, so cold then. I recalled the

other times when she was there and I, small, beside her. I could fit into the hollow her body and arm made. I curled up there. I belonged.

We sat like that looking at the night beyond the window, and the square of light that was the kitchen.

When she stood up she said I should go to sleep. I would have to be grown-up she said, when she was gone. Tomorrow. I was her good girl, her best girl, she could rely on me. There was still so much to say. Her words came out in a rush, one chasing the other, all with love in them. Look after yourself. Look after the children, take care of your father. I'll always love you.

Good girl. Best girl. I couldn't look at her anymore. Her words were so different from what she was going to do. I love you. I am going away. She kissed me on the forehead. Her arms encircled me one last time. I didn't look at her, but I knew she was crying.

She turned off the kitchen light and the dark was complete. She wasn't there anymore. And I heard the possums then. They came when she left us.

I heard them in the hedge. Warble cry. A growl, a trilling. They scurried along the wire that cut across the yard to the house. They scrambled into the gutter, claws against the corrugated roof. The branches complained, the leaves were crushed. There was a knocking on glass. Dark shapes on the drainpipe, and then their amble-glide across the roof and their thumping as they squeezed in between the roof and the ceiling. My mother was going and the possums came, to take up the space she had vacated.

Those sounds, the rustlings and scratchings of the new possum tenants were stealthy at first as they made their nest. Ignoring us, and the outside world, they made their own world under our roof, drawing in all the corners about them, like a cloak. A family.

Their sounds were shared by other sounds that night. By doors opening and closing in distant rooms. By drawers being pulled out. Voices smothered by the increasing wind. A man's voice. A softer voice, explaining. Steps walking, walking, a circle, and then a direct path. To the back door, which opened, flapping in the wind, slamming shut. A car started and drove away. The wind waged a war with the trees and the house. The rain punished the roof and all other sounds faded away.

A new life began for us the following day. We took on roles and seldom stepped out of them, neither amongst ourselves, nor with the town, which expected us to play them. Abandoned children.

Jenny's so bossy, Katie would say, and Al agreed with her although he was too young for his opinion to count. Jenny is bossy to get things done, I said to myself, and didn't take any notice of what they said.

That first breakfast without her was the same as all the other breakfasts without Mum. She had left a note to tell me what to do. How Dad liked his eggs and how Al should eat his porridge no matter what. I saw to it that he did, although he complained. But I didn't cook Dad's eggs. He didn't eat with us.

We went to school as we always did, as though nothing was wrong. In a small town it doesn't take long for news to get around, especially if it is bad news. People were kind. But they stared. My friends stared as though I had changed. Maybe I had.

In class I sat at my usual place by the window and put on my concentrating expression like hooking spectacles behind ears to mask the eyes. My thoughts weren't on my schoolwork. They strayed out the window to the fields and the gumtrees where cockatoos winked silver white in the green. The teachers' voices came from far away, from other rooms to the one I was in. They were kind to me; they left me to myself at first. When they talked at me and I didn't respond they moved away. But they kept their eyes on me to see what I would do next. I didn't know it then, but they were there, at the ready, if I should need them.

My friends were more at a loss of what to do with me. I had forgotten the games they played at recess. I didn't join in. I sat by myself under the trees and it looked as though I was watching, but I wasn't. They soon stopped asking me to join them.

We were a curiosity suddenly to the people in our street. Those poor Blackwell kids. Pity in eyes that were quickly averted. Nothing was said except: 'Fifteen thirty-seven... but you can pay at the end of the month', as the lady behind the counter handed over the groceries. And a block of chocolate for free as though that would make up for the emptiness inside. I learned quickly that those kind faces expected a happy look in return, a smile instead of brimming eyes. So I smiled. Thank you for the groceries. Thank you for the chocolate. Thank you for not saying what you're thinking. It was only later that I learned tears were okay too – that tears ease grief.

The only time I remember smiling and really meaning it was when it was my turn to dive off the board high above the waterhole where our teacher had taken us to swim. Come on Jenny, don't dither. Your turn!

I walked to the edge of the taut plank. It lay in the air across the circle of water. I could see the class damp, glistening faces upturned, and then the glare of the sun obliterated their detail and they weren't there anymore.

I dived. I jumped high into the air and I became a white bird. Arms that were wings, a body that rose and turned and would never fall. Flying. Mama, are you free now too? I smiled before my body touched the cold of the water and I came back into myself.

We didn't see our Dad in the days after Mum left. And then one day he was there when we came back from school, sitting behind a newspaper the pages of which he didn't turn.

He ate dinner with us. We ate. He didn't. He left his to grow cold. We talked, he was silent. He remained behind his newsprint pages and we didn't see his eyes or his face.

Mark ate my apple at school today, but I had his banana. Do you want a banana tomorrow, Al? No, I don't like them. Mary asked if I could stay the night. Can I? When? Tomorrow. Maybe the weekend. Dad should have answered, but he didn't. So I was Mum and Dad. And all the time there was a gentle tapping above our heads, a stirring of bodies. A reminder.

Dad put his newspaper down, looked at us and turned his face upwards. We saw his eyes. They were without light, dull and staring, fixed to a point just ahead of him. Red eyes. He had the look in them of wanting to be somewhere else. Possums, he said, grim, and lifted the paper again.

He went out later. Went out every night to come back silent and stumbling with that look of staring at something just ahead of him, focused on nothing else. Swaying, he would shut his door and we would hear him pacing as the possums began their pacing above him and us.

In the mornings they were silent and Dad was gone. During the day we were at school. At night he wasn't there but the possums were.

Katie woke up one night. Her crying woke me. Or maybe it was the noise on the roof. They were jumping about in a foot-taping folkdance, calling to one another. Animal shrieks that tumbled down from the roof into Katie's room. It's possums, I said. I sat on her bed and rubbed her back until her crying stilled. It's nothing to be scared of.

I'm not scared. She started to cry again. They live here, a mummy, a daddy and the children. And then softly repeating the lost word: Mummy –

Al woke up then and started to cry too because Katie was. The room was filled with their wet sobs and the possum sounds. Eventually they exhausted themselves and stopped; the possums did not.

Next morning there was a little hole in Katie's ceiling, the flakings of plaster on her toys and on the floor. The furry body of a possum leaned against it, soft grey-brown. It was as though it wanted to climb into our lives with us, not just stay in the roof above. I poked it with a pencil. Hey you, move! It turned and a paw appeared. Sharp nails. I tapped them and the possum moved away. Katie laughed. She had forgotten the night.

Our Dad started to drink at home and weave about the room looking for something to do. He never found it, except to lift the bottle to the glass one more time. We were frightened of what the liquid in the bottle did to him, what it turned him into, but we didn't have words to shape our fear.

He slumped into the chair and stared at the ceiling, and the movement of the possums began instantly, loud, tapping and knocking knuckles against wood. The rustlings became grumblings became voices that shrieked. The bodies were heavy sounding, as though the creatures had grown over large. Their movements were pronounced. They enjoyed the slopes of our house and the wood and iron they could knock against in abandon.

Damned possums. Dad's eyes were staring, his halting speech was thick. He stood up waving his fist at the roof. He swayed. Oh bloody hell, he mumbled at the possums, at his own clumsy movements. His glance came down off the ceiling and caught ours. He understood the meaning of the expression in them, although we did not. It made him angry to see himself mirrored in us. It made him shout. In his anger he towered above us and we moved away from him.

I'll get rid of those pests. Threats now. He stumbled outside to do that, to get rid of them, but he could not, and he went away in the direction he always went.

He came home very late. It was threatening rain. He came into the silent, oppressive house and heard the possums in the roof. A sliding thump, a scrabbling up again. A reminder. A constant reminder.

Will you be quiet! Fur enjoyed iron. Enjoyment repeated again and again.

Damned possums. Loud roar that woke us and was answered by thunder. He crashed outside again. Get out. Get out get out get out get out. In the distance low lightning flickered, the approaching wind was cool. He got out a ladder and stood at the bottom of it looking up at the roof.

They were perched on the drainpipe; they sat still and looked down at him with unblinking eyes. Neither man nor animals moved. Then the torchlight wavered erratically, making their eyes red. Still unblinking. Red defiance, anger, huge anger in things so small, perhaps because they were so small. My father's head was back, his mouth opened in a yell as he tried to get them to move. Get away, go away, loud noise, loud voice, get off you, go on, bloody hell what do you think you're doing on my roof, it's midnight, sound like an elephant, oh bloody hell, go on, go away! Shouted exorcism.

The possums' claws clicked on the drainpipe. There was no other movement, no sound except the faint scratching. They kept staring down with those large, unfearing eyes and the red glint, taking little notice of the man who climbed the ladder towards them. Just the guttural warning possum growl.

He swayed unsteadily on his feet. He had to back down the three or four rungs he'd climbed because it was too difficult with the torch in hand. Oh, bloody hell! He put it down and the light made a circle on the weatherboard of the house, a ringed circle, like the iris of an eye. With sharp outlines of grass, shadow blades cutting it.

The thunder growled from the hills behind him. He started to climb again. The possums remained motionless, ready to defend the roof, their domain now.

We had turned on the lights in the house when we heard him come home. We stood and watched him now, as the ladder wove as a reed in the wind, threatening to fall. Katie held on to my hand. Al stood hidden behind me. Their faces were white in the porch light, round, drawn circles of fear as they beheld their father.

And the possums continued to sit stone still. Dark rounded shapes, fur-spiked, they were other-worldly creatures with large eyes and their thick fox-fur tails twitching; pink noses, sharp teeth. They laughed in the face of the coming storm and at the man climbing the ladder set against the house. He climbed very high and didn't hear the 'Daddy' we called out to him, didn't notice the fear in our voices. Katie started to cry, Al to whimper.

Dad stopped at last. He wanted to grasp the biggest possum, the possums' mum and press the breath from her. Shake her until she was a lifeless scrap of fur. The possum sat looking at him, knowing he couldn't. He let go of the rungs and reached for her, his tormentor, but she melted into the shadows, only the rustling leaves telling tale to where she went. The others skitted away and began skiing the slopes of the roof. And the ladder began to slip sideways along the wall of the house, wood scraping wood.

Daddy! Louder now, recalling him from his rage. Daddy, look out! The ladder came to rest in the branch of a tree, which supported the sudden weight flung onto it. The ladder leaned precariously. Our Dad remained very still.

I ran from the porch to the ladder. Katie and Al followed. They helped me right it, to set it up again and steady it. We called to our father to tell him to try and get off now, but he remained unmoving in the tree, not wanting to let go of the warm-barked wood that held him. On the roof the possums had stopped in a row at its edge and looked down.

At last he moved his hands slowly to grasp the rungs, he moved his feet to secure his hold. We pressed against the ladder to take his weight so that he wouldn't fall. As he climbed down, it started to rain.

With the first drops the fire within him went out and he sagged into the ground. He was safe, but he would not let the ladder go. We watched him, we watched the raindrops run down his cheeks, and then his tears and he bowed his face to the earth.

Daddy. Katie came to him first, little girl hands lifting his big palms. Daddy. Al let go of the ladder and clung to the man. Dad. I walked towards him too, and he put his arms around all of us.

The night's storm had swept the new day clean. Dad came to breakfast, sat down to it and the paper remained folded beside his plate. I made him eggs the way he liked them. There was a knock on the door after breakfast. When Dad opened it the draught stirred the wooden seagull and it began to move its wings in flight. A man from the council

stood on the step below Dad. He'd come for the possums, he said and indicated the traps on the verandah.

A tentative movement, sleep-softened, rustled under the eaves and was still. I looked up to the ceiling. Dad did too. He turned to me, to us all. There'll be no need, he said after a moment.

© Copyright, 1988 Jutta Goetze