

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 less 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 ginger 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 bit 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 me! - 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 wrong, 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, accidentally 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

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 it 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 alligators 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 not 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, come 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 was 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 imported 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 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 proper 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.

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 proper suburbanite possum.

2. Old Acquaintance.

ELEPHANT'S When I first started going back to Newport regularly, in early
MOTHER 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, presumably, 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

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 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,^{xxxxix} 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 rheumatically. 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.

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

There was a real baby boom that spring. `Miri' had a son, **BABY BOOM** 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 guesstimate, 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 guesstimate, 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,^{x1} 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 to 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 That tail is a tale in itself. The open wound simply wouldn't
a Tail 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

Pig had been Jenny's regular attendant since Joe's departure.

`PUMPKIN' 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 local yearling when she was six months old, and continued to grow. **and nests** 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}

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 Part of the reason for the improvement was that she acquired to the an auxiliary form of locomotion - me. She used my legs as spares, on a situation 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

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.⁹⁹

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

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 'Miri''s baby was part of another veritable baby boom in
Returnees 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.

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.