

KATHLEEN HAWES

Opossum Problems

LAST YEAR A LONELY POSSUM crept into my bed. This possum has problems: booze, Benzos, Oxy, you name it. He'll snort, smoke, or pop pretty much anything. He can't pay his rent, but he's good in the sack. At night he tickles the inside of my thighs with his whiskers till I just can't take it, then I have to pull him up close. His tail is bald and skinny. His teeth are pointed, widely spaced.

One morning when the possum was lying naked on my kitchen floor, he told me he needed to borrow a few bucks to tide him over for the week. That he would get me back, for sure. Anyway, didn't I remember when he paid for the pizza and the sixer last Wednesday?

I didn't remember, but I was late for work, so I told him, "Yeah, fine. I just need the money back by April. You know, tax stuff."

The possum looked at me through slanted yellow eyes. "So many conditions," he hissed.

PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SAYING this town has a bad possum problem. Possums are roaming through backyards, sleeping under porches, hiding out in basements. It's gotten so out of hand that they scamper down Main Street in broad daylight like they own the place or something.

Couple days ago, my friend Nell found a possum sleeping in her son's bed. When she went to wake her son up for work in the morning, she just saw this long tail hanging all limp in the sheets. When the possum opened his eyes, his little slit of a mouth, he told my friend Nell to go get him a Pepsi. Said he was taking some time off work for a while, that those assholes over at Commonwealth Dairy don't appreciate how hard he works. My friend Nell was scared so she didn't shoo the possum out of her son's bed. She just got him a Pepsi and went downstairs to watch TV. Said her hands were shaking all through *Price Is Right*.

My next-door neighbor got knocked up by a possum last spring. She met him down at Kip's on a Friday. He had just come off an oil rig in Louisiana, pockets lined with cash. They had fun till the money

ran out—about two weeks. That’s all it took though. The Louisiana Possum told my neighbor there were no decent jobs left in the South for hard-working possums like himself, for straight shooters. “All those country-ass nutria work for nickels,” he said. “How can a possum compete?” He explained to my next-door neighbor he just needed a place to stay till he could put some cash down to lease a car, get on his feet. Now my neighbor is in her third trimester and the Louisiana possum just sits smoking cigarettes on her porch all day. At night, he spends the money she gives him drinking good bourbon down at Kip’s. Meanwhile, my neighbor is working two jobs and shopping for Jolly Jumpers. When she asks her possum to pick up food at the grocery store, all he brings home are a couple dead mice and some birdseed from the feeder out back.

I told my neighbor, it’s no good for the baby. She needs to get that loser out of the house. But she insists her possum will get it together. “He’s a good possum,” she says. “Just because he was raised by vermin, doesn’t mean that’s who he *really* is. Besides, you can’t give up on a person, even if he has a tail.”

Needless to say, I felt a little guilty when I called the exterminator. My possum was becoming problematic. He owed me ninety bucks and every time I asked him about it, he would get real mad and start yelling that I didn’t trust him. Plus, he was hanging around all the time, making himself at home with my spare key—drinking my wine, eating the ice cream out of the freezer.

When I got the exterminator on the phone, he told me, “Sorry, I don’t do possums.”

“Why not?” I asked.

The exterminator said they were too much hassle. “Those bastards can take a pinky clean off at the knuckle.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?”

“Try Fish and Wildlife.”

I dialed the Department of Fish and Wildlife and talked to a lady who sounded tired. “You’re the seventh person today who’s called about the possums. We are really backed up.”

I told the lady my possum situation was serious. He had a spare key to my house, he was eating all my food, he was becoming volatile.

The lady asked, “How did he get a key?”

I said that wasn’t the point. The possum had the key now, and I needed him gone.

“It’s animal instinct to find shelter and to seek out food,” the lady told me, like I was stupid or something. “He’s just doing what possums do.”

“Look here,” I was getting annoyed. “Isn’t it your job to help people in town with their wildlife problems? Are you going to get rid of my possum, or do I have to talk to your supervisor?”

She sighed. “I can send somebody out next week. But we only provide the removal service—no trapping. You’ll have to buy a cage, catch the possum, then call us.”

After she took down my address, I asked her, “Where do I get a possum cage, anyway?”

The lady said, “Where you get everything else. Amazon.”

THE POSSUM TRAP on Amazon cost forty bucks, and since I was already ninety in the hole, I was gonna have to pull a double shift at work to make up the cash. I decided I would try reasoning with my possum first. I drove into town, walked down Elliot Street, and found him where he usually is in the afternoon—sitting in the doorway next to Indo-Mart. He was hanging with some other possums. They were all sipping cans of Natty Ice out of paper bags.

“We need to talk,” I said.

All the possums turned around, looking me up and down. I had decided to wear a cute dress and some lipstick for this conversation. Figured if things got out of hand, if my possum got too loud, it might help if I looked nice, that maybe some good Samaritan walking down the street would step in and help me out. But now there was nothing but possums on the whole block. I was starting to feel uneasy.

“Sure, Babe.” My possum stamped out his cigarette. Standing upright on his hind legs he waddled toward me and wrapped his tail around my waist. I pushed the tail away briskly, maybe a little harder than I meant to. Anyway, when I shoved his tail, it threw him off balance, and he fell back on all fours. His friends started laughing. “Oh man, you gonna let your girl talk to you like that?” one of the possums said between gulps of beer.

My possum does not like to be embarrassed. He is already self-conscious because he is blind in one eye. When he was a baby, a turkey vulture pecked half the thing out while his mother was gone slug hunting. She was gone a lot of the time, I guess. Anyhow, he almost died. He told me once that all the possum kids at school used to tease

him about his blind eye, so now he can't stand to be embarrassed in front of anyone. Especially other possums. It makes him crazy. While his friends were laughing, my possum squinted up at me, then turned and spat. "Fuckin' bitch. Pussy smells like a fucking dumpster."

I went home.

In bed later that night, I heard the key in the lock. Then some rummaging in the fridge. When he crawled under the sheets I felt his wet nose on the back of my neck, but I pretended to be asleep.

Next morning, I bought the cage on Amazon. I had two days to learn how to trap a possum. Most of the stuff I read online said that canned dog food works good for bait, but I figured now that my possum was accustomed to eating people food, he probably wouldn't be enticed by just anything. When the cage arrived, I loaded it with ham and cheese Hot Pockets, then left the door open like the directions said. Inside the cage, there was this lever. When the possum stepped inside, the lever would slam the door shut and lock behind him. I didn't put the cage in the yard because I was worried that it might attract the Louisiana possum, and I sure as hell wasn't wasting forty bucks on that lowlife. Plus, my neighbor would have been pissed—baby on the way and all. I decided to put the cage on the kitchen floor since my possum liked to lie there anyway. He said the cold tile on his back felt good through his scratchy coat.

After I baited the trap, I went to bed but couldn't sleep. I started thinking about all the summer nights me and the possum had hung in the back yard grilling steaks and catching frogs. I remembered the day we went swimming in the West River and he picked me an armful of black-eyed Susans, the time he sniffed out some truffles on the Wantastiquet trail and later we made soup. Just as I was deciding this wasn't such a good idea, that maybe I was jumping the gun here, I heard the key in the door. There were some sniffing noises, then a loud snap.

Then came this awful squeal. I heard claws scabble against metal, hissing then screeching. I felt terrible, but I couldn't go down and face the possum after I had betrayed him like that. If I let him out, what could I say? What would he do to me? I couldn't call the Department of Fish and Wildlife till the morning, so I just lay in my bed, listening to my possum in his cage.

Around dawn, I crept halfway down the stairs and peered into the kitchen. My possum was still awake, pacing and grunting, pushing his pink nose through the metal bars. He finally looked up and saw me.

We were both still for a second. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't know what else to do."

I was prepared to hear a dramatic apology, a whole song and dance. My possum is good at these: *Oh, Babe, I'll change, I'll stop with the drinking, the drugs. Things will be different.* Instead, he just began to make chattering possum noises. He growled a little and clawed the cage door, but no words came out of his mouth. When I looked into his yellow eyes, I didn't see the possum I had shared a bed with during this long winter, I just saw a stupid, half-blind animal. I couldn't believe we ever had anything in common.

When the guy from Fish and Wildlife finally showed up, he came into the kitchen and hoisted the cage into his arms. "Twelfth possum pickup I've had since Monday," he told me. "Last year this time it was goddamn raccoons. Don't get me started on the raccoons."

I followed him out to the truck. The possum looked at me through the bars and began to make squeaking noises.

I looked away. "What will you do with it?" I asked. "Will you take it to the woods somewhere far away and let it go? Or will you, you know, exterminate him?"

The guy looked at me then rolled his eyes. "You called us, lady. What do you care what happens to this possum?"

"Yeah," I kicked a clump of dirt. "Guess you're right."