

Dixon Possum

By Carl Peel

Barbara's relaxing when I come home, her whole gangly length spread on the couch. She smiles, happy to see me, which feels nice. She doesn't always smile when I come home.

There are good days and bad days, but mostly they're getting better.

I lean down and kiss her. Her brown curls brush my cheek as I do.

"Guess what?" She says. It's the first time in weeks I've seen her in a full toothy smile.

With it, I am brought back to the early days, before Clarissa and her short, sweet, difficult life, before Barbara and I were even married, when she was a dance student, long and thin, always moving, always smiling.

"What?" I say.

"You're the proud papa...." She pauses here for dramatic emphasis, and for a second it works. For a moment I fantasize we're starting that part of our lives over.

"...Of a brand new baby possum," she finishes.

I laugh and roll my eyes, happy we're joking around like this. "Great, you're giving birth to possums." Perhaps that part of her I feared we'd lost forever is coming back. "And where is this new baby possum of mine?" I motion with my head for her to follow me

into the kitchen.

“He’s under the deck,” she says getting up. “He’s so cute. This big.” She has her hands out surmising the size of a book. “Including its tail,” she adds. “He’s got a little white face and then his body gets darker to a black rump. When I came home he was clawing at the front door trying to get in. When I got closer he ran down the side of the house and went under the deck. He’s adorable!”

I don’t know much about possums. They’re large rats from what I know: slow moving with triangular teeth. As a kid, my father told me a possum would attack your foot with its claws and gnashers if you bumped it at night. I’ve also heard it would just play dead.

“I wish you’d have seen him,” Barbara says. “I named him Dixon. Dixon Possum.”

“Cute” I say.

“It’s got the tiniest little nose. It looked lost. I think it got separated from its mama.”

“What sounds good for dinner?” I ask.

“Oh just anything,” she says. “You think Josie would like a new little possum playmate?”

Josie is our cat, a spoiled Maine Coon who drinks from the tap in the bathtub and wants us to throw things she can fetch: fake mice, pens, even bottle caps. She runs after them and slides across the hardwood floor trying to stop. Sometimes she’ll come back with something bloodied, a real mouse or a bird from outside, and drop it at our feet.

I open the refrigerator. “No,” I say. “I don’t think Josie would like a little playmate.”

“I could put some kibble in a bowl.”

“If it’s away from its mother,” I say, “it’s going to need to learn to get food on its own or it won’t survive.”

“You’re probably right.” She says. “You think of those things. You’re smart.” Her voice

has a sad lilt to it, which makes me watch her for an extra second. “Did you get milk?” she asks.

I knew there was something I’d forgotten, some husbandly duty I’d failed to remember.

The milk seems to expire early in our fridge. I make a mental note to turn the dial a notch colder. “No,” I say. “See, I’m not that smart. I don’t think of everything.”

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Our daughter Clarissa died last year. She was born with Cystic Fibrosis. Turns out Barbara and I are a bad genetic combination. I don’t mean our kids will get my big ears and the gap between my front teeth, or Barbara’s bony height and lazy eye. That stuff is superficial. One of us would be fine, but both of us, unknowingly, carried the gene for Cystic Fibrosis. We doomed our daughter from the day she was conceived.

The illness wasn’t too difficult to deal with at first. We’d break open a capsule and stir little beads of enzymes into Clarissa’s baby food.

In fact, Clarissa’s health was great until she was six and started having trouble breathing. By then we could really see ourselves in Clarissa, Barbara’s pale green eyes and the way her clavicles stick out, my reddish arm hair on too-white skin. But the most defining traits we gave her were the problems with her lungs, with her intestines. We had her clearing out her sinuses with a solution and breathing through a little machine that added humidity and medicine to her lungs. She did this twice a day, morning and night while Barbara read to her or I played the piano. She took enzyme pills before eating anything and slept

for twelve hours each day. We had to be strict about that, about it all really. She couldn't function on less than twelve hours. With it, she was able to go to school, and for the most part, live the life of a kid. It wasn't all work and complications.

In her eighth year though she spent the winter in the hospital. Her doctor, Phillip Yee, a young man who specialized in CF told us that she'd most likely have to spend a couple months of each year there. Hearing this, Clarissa looked at me from under the green hospital sheet with a scared and guilty look as if she'd broken the arm off one of her dolls.

That look, the sad, guilty look, I've since come to recognize as pure Barbara, the one she walks around the house with now. That's the first time I'd seen it, at the hospital, on Clarrissa.

Doctor Yee asked if there was anything special he could do, to make it all easier.

"Tell her it's not her fault," I told him out in the hall. Then I thought about it and added,

"And tell my wife the same."

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I am playing the piano when Barbara comes home the next day from teaching dance, going to therapy, and a session at the gym. It's important to keep busy.

"Good workout?" I ask.

"Fabulous," She says, splaying her arms wide. She pauses a moment, puts her hands on her hips, and adds "Susan says I should feed the possum if I want to, that if it would make me feel good I should just do it. You agree?"

“Maybe,” I say.

“Possums make great pets, Susan says. People keep them in cages. They’re very friendly.”

I smile. I’m not going to argue with her therapist. Although I’ve never heard of keeping a possum as a pet. “Huh,” I say, hoping the idea will just fade away, thinking, one, I don’t want something in a cage in the house, and, two, wild animals should be left wild.

She kisses the back of my neck. “Play Claire de Lune, would you?”

I sigh. I’m not ready to play Claire de Lune. Or the Moonlight Sonata, or any of the other songs I used to play when Clarissa was falling asleep. Or more to the point, despite her recent good moods, I don’t think Barbara is ready to hear Claire de Lune or any of the others.

I pull the cover over the keyboard. “I’ve got to water the plants,” I say. “Join me?”

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When Clarissa was eleven, she required hospitalization again. She spent January to April in a bed on the eastern ward devouring the Nancy Drew mystery series, breathing from a nebulizer and getting extra nutrients from an I.V. tube to get her lung capacity back up to normal.

When she was doing well enough to return home, in April, we threw a party for her and the friends she hadn’t seen since Christmas. Those kids fawned over her, wanting to be the one to play the frog or the witch or even the bridge in the little plays she’d arrange in her bedroom. That was a thing to behold. It made you want to sell your house

and give all the proceeds to the foundations searching for a cure for CF or any other disease, or at least pray. Pray every time you wake up, or go to bed, or sit at the piano, or cook, or watch a hawk soar over the hills of Los Angeles, pray they'll find a way to squeeze a few more years out. Ten years ago expectancy was only 17. Now it's 23. So there's progress being made. Our last name is Hope, after all.

Each year after that it seemed Clarissa spent a longer winter in the hospital. Last year, we spent Christmas, there, earlier than normal. She was 15. She spent winter and spring doing homework her teachers sent. She devoured the Harry Potter books and the Lord of the Rings. Still part girl, she'd grown breasts, a frightening thing for a father: an ending as much as a beginning. A boy, Ronnie Dalson, with jeans several sizes too big, came to visit her.

When Palm Sunday arrived we were hoping she'd be coming home but were told it wouldn't be until May. The activities director at the hospital taught the kids to make palm frond origami. Clarissa made a swan. I look at it now on the bookshelf when I'm playing the piano. I imagine my little girl sitting with me when I play. I play Claire de Lune and the Moonlight Sonata all day long when Barbara's not around.

Clarissa passed away on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. There was nothing anyone could say to take me out of the numb, underwater state I was in. It was worse for Barbara who stared out from our front window at the city below, the block of the children's hospital a nadir of focus for days and weeks on end. Though we'd known it was coming for years, for all of Clarissa's life, it was too soon. We thought we'd at least get to see her graduate high school, at least grow old enough to go on a first date with someone like Ronnie Dalson. It didn't seem like a lot to ask.

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Barbara lays in the hammock with her arm stretched out holding a glass of Chardonnay. It's still warm. The sun has just begun drifting down behind the sycamores.

"You want a sip?" she asks, raising the glass toward me. It is great seeing her like this, in a better mood, stretched out, relaxed, her legs far out in front of her, her arms swaying like branches.

"No. Thanks." I have my thumb over the front of the hose fanning water onto the bougainvillea climbing the back fence.

"Hey," she says, getting up. "Let's see if we can find the possum under the deck."

I turn off the water and we squat trying to peer under the deck. It's impossible to see. There's too much ivy and shadow.

"Jesus Christ!" Barbara says. Her urgency makes me jump. She's looking at my feet.

I don't know how I missed it before but at my toes is a head, separated and freshly gnawed on. It is small, and pointed at the snout, unmistakably a baby possum.

"Shit," I say. There is a piece of grayish fur nearby, and a heart, just half-an-inch big, resting on a brick of the patio.

Barbara tears up. "I should have done something for it. I should have given it a home and a bed yesterday." She wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand.

I guide her head to my shoulder. "There's nothing you could have done," I say.

"I could have been its mother," she snaps at me. "I could have protected it." She walks up

the path along the side of the house and disappears inside.

I look down at the head and the heart. I don't want to deal with it right now. But I know if I leave it, I'll forget, and Barbara will come out here tomorrow or the next day and be traumatized all over again. So I grab a dustpan and a whiskbroom from the garage. I scoop up the head, the heart and the fur. I walk around the yard. There is more fur, black and white but mostly gray and plenty of it by the rhododendrons, more under a chair on the deck.

I imagine the little possum running for its life. I hope it didn't play dead. I hope it clawed and gnashed and did some real damage to whatever was chasing it. The underside of the fur, the severed skull, the little heart, everything, has a red sheen like this just took place. I look at the little heart in the dustpan and imagine it still pumping, clinging to life. It looks like it could. I blow on it, wishing it alive.

She doesn't have to say anything, but I know Barbara blames me. I wish I'd have told her yeah, go ahead and get a cage, we'll keep the baby possum. Or better yet I should have gone to Todd's Pet Depot and gotten it myself. That would have been the thing to do. But I couldn't see it. It's pointless to try to change the cruel direction of nature. If nothing dies, nothing eats, nothing lives, yada, yada, etc., etc.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my wrist, careful not to use my hands, ridiculously wary of disease. Then I walk the remains of little Dixon in the dustpan up to the trashcans at the street. I open the lid and find I can't just dump him in with the old milk and other garbage. I'll go back in and grab a shoebox, or small carton, and I'll bury him out back. Then the work will begin. I'll try to repair this little setback. I'll work with the tools of kindness and patience. I'll keep in mind how Barbara feels these losses happen because

of who she is and who I am. “It’s in our Genes,” she yelled at me after Clarissa died. She pounded her fists into my chest for several minutes until it was sore and I imagined it caving in.

Did I leave then, mired in my own sadness, and roam for months changing everything there was to change about my life? No, I did not. Did I strongly hold back my own tears and say something comforting and full of wisdom that would pull us through? Again, the answer is no. I simply took hold of her wrists and told her she’d have to stop hitting me, then I wrapped my arms around her and let her lean into me as I leaned into her. And I let myself cry, watching over her shoulder while the nurses unhooked our daughter from the machines.

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