

Possum · *Karen Condon*

IN THE MONTH OF APRIL, the day after a storm, I heard a scratching sound in the fireplace.

I'd never looked up the chimney before, but thought I'd like it in there. I imagined a small, brick room, walls lined with soot, soft and even as velvet, a square of blue sky at the top. There would be an iron door set on top of the chimney, which Father opened and closed by turning the brass handle on the front of the fireplace.

The scratching sounded very close, only a couple of feet up. This creature must be clinging to the wall, about to fall into the grating. I waited. The scratching stopped.

I pulled the grating out onto the hearth and ran to get a flattened box from the closet. When I lay the cardboard down in the ashes, the scratching began again. The creature must be running up the chimney now. She would peer down at me from the sky, and I would peer up at her from the fireplace. I lay down on my back and eased myself in.

The possum thrust her face into mine, baring her teeth, tiny feet gripping the edge of a black shelf only a foot away from my face.

Her fur was silvery white, her eyes hard and black. Quick breathing echoed against the brick. She wagged her head and bared her teeth as if laughing at the sight of me.

Carefully I slid out of the fireplace, removed the cardboard, and pushed the grating back in place.

If Mother weren't sick in bed I would tell her, and she would climb up the chimney, pull the possum out of the flue with her hands, carry it outside, and drop it in the woods. Mother was a Christian Scientist. I'd made her sick by laughing at her the day the school nurse sent me home. Now I was better, and she lay in her bed, hunched around her own sickness as if it were something I might want to steal.

I was in science class when I was sent home. My chair was beside the window, and the sun on my head and neck and back was burning hot. I squinted my eyes against the glare from the white desk top, and covered them with my hands, because my head was throbbing and my ears were ringing from the heat and the light. Finally I sobbed in pain and shame and the teacher led me to the nurse.

The nurse touched my forehead with cool, smooth fingers and said I must have caught something from Jennifer Whiting, who was absent. I thought wearily about Mrs. Whiting, who smeared Jennifer's cuts with iodine, who lined up iodine-colored medicine bottles on the kitchen window sill, who, every afternoon after school, pressed her lips against Jennifer's forehead to test for fever. When I went to Jennifer's house I saw her do this.

At home, Mother watched me get into bed and closed the door behind her. I looked out the double window beside me, straining to see through the curtains. I felt hot and nervous, my legs and arms ready to jump and kick or grab something. The curtains looked ready to burn with the sun shining through them. I rolled over and faced the door.

When I opened my eyes the slashes of hot sunshine were gone from the bed. Mother was hanging clothes in the closet. I felt numb and heavy as clay.

"Mrs. Hester will be by later," she said. Mrs. Hester was our new healing practitioner.

"I think I need some iodine instead," I said. "I'll just take one sip." I laughed and shut my eyes. When I opened them again Mother had disappeared.

When Mrs. Hester came I covered my head. I watched her from under the blanket. She unfolded a chair, sat down by the door and began to mutter. She was facing across the room, so that I could only see the left side of her face. Sometimes she turned and looked at me with her left eye but her head always sprang back as if there were something on the other side of the room that interested her. This was not one of our folding chairs. She must carry her own chair around with her, I thought, and began to laugh, which quickly made me hot and weary. When I stopped she was muttering more urgently, and gesturing energetically, like a mime.

"Speak up," I shouted, and laughed again. When I opened my eyes she and her chair were gone. Mother came in later and scolded. I covered my head with blankets and cried.

Mother didn't open that door again during the three days that I was home from school. I didn't know she was sick until I got hungry on the third day and came downstairs and my brother told me that Mrs. Hester was coming back.

Mrs. Hester appeared at the kitchen door while I was eating my break-

fast. She came in without knocking and moved silently through the kitchen, showing only her profile. Mother's door scraped against the carpet. "I have a small headache," Mother said. For fifteen minutes Mrs. Hester urgently whispered her secret healing plan to Mother behind the bedroom door. When she came back out I saw the right side of her face. She had a lump the size of a golf ball protruding from her cheek. I watched the lump, waiting for it to move, as she walked to the door.

I didn't visit Mother for the rest of the week while she healed herself. Instead, every day after school before my brother came home, I tried to entice the possum down the chimney. She blindly wagged her head back and forth. We hated each other. It felt good to hate her, like twisting something. Once she rubbed her nose against the side of the chimney, releasing cinders that fell onto my face, and I rubbed them into a black mask, which I wore to scare my brother when he got home.

Watching the possum shake her head at me, angry, reminded me of the dark still air of my mother's bedroom, and of my mother, her hands cupped around a tumor in her cheek, on her neck, on her forehead, ready to pluck it out when it was time.

By Saturday the possum had been in the chimney for seven days. When I got up that morning, Mother's bedroom door was open, and the bed was neatly, stiffly made. She was outside working. She pulled up weeds and moss and maple seedlings and dug grimly all around the edges of our property as if to release it from its moorings and float it out of town. When she came in, her talk shook with an urgent rhythm as if she were digging or chopping wood.

"Grandpa Kane and Mrs. Burleigh are coming for lunch," she said. "I want you kids to help me set the table."

Pots and pans clamored to life as Mother crawled halfway into the cupboard under the oven. Her mother's pots and pans were kept in that cupboard. Each had a black bull's eye on the bottom. The noise stopped and Mother emerged from the cupboard holding the coffee pot in one hand and a flat wooden box in the other.

We looked at the box. Dusty silverware lay packed in crimson velvet like bodies in coffins. She held it up and grabbed handfuls of spoon and fork and knife and flung them into the sink with a shattering sound. We watched. It took a long time to empty the box. She filled the sink with steaming water.

Father carried his pistol through the kitchen door, looking bewildered and spent like a captured soldier. He'd been target shooting at the sportsmen's club. Without looking at us or at anything he put the pistol on the table and went into the living room. Bryn slowly traced a smudgy outline around the gun. I watched. He traced it again. I looked into the living room. Father was sitting in the corner by the fireplace, frowning into his pipe. The shades were pulled and the lights were off. He leaned back in his chair as if he would like to tip back into the darkened corner and disappear.

"We'll set the table," I said.

I chose the cornucopia tablecloth from the bottom of the tablecloth drawer. Bryn reached for the pistol.

"No, leave it there." I said. "Who'll notice?"

I pushed the gun to the end where Mrs. Burleigh always sat. Mrs. Burleigh was so polite. She'd be too polite to say anything.

We stood at opposite ends of the table and spread the cloth over it. We carried wobbling stacks of china bowls and plates to the table.

"How many people?" Bryn asked.

"Seven," I said. "No, six."

We set the plates around the table. We sat. I couldn't wait to tell about the possum.

Bryn got up and ran to the window. He pulled the curtain to one side.

Grandpa Kane's black station wagon lurched over the hump at the top of the driveway and settled to a stop. In profile, framed by the car window, Grandpa Kane looked like the king on a deck of cards. He had those troubled eyebrows.

Mrs. Burleigh got out first, and moved slow as a float in a parade down the driveway to the door, her face white under a bouffant hairdo and clam-shaped black sunglasses. Grandpa Kane followed at a distance, moving his lips as if in prayer.

Mother did not care for Grandpa Kane. He had married her mother three days before she died of a stroke. A few months later he married Mrs. Burleigh. He was a healing practitioner like Mrs. Hester. He had healed Mrs. Burleigh of something.

"Look at that hair," I said. "She must have had it rebouffed."

"Highest hair in the world," said Bryn.

Mrs. Burleigh stepped through the door.

"My," she said, "hello hello!" She talked in a very soft voice. Mrs. Bur-

leigh had many voices. Her church-singing voice, which made her sound like her throat was full of syrup, and her sudden laughing voice, which sounded like dropped silverware. This was her charm school voice. In charm school she'd been trained to insert breathy "h" sounds before each word to soften her speech.

She wore a dress of dark green with a floral pattern. It was wide and billowy and silent with corners that danced around her legs. There was no telling what that dress was made of. "Tock-tock" went the heels of her dark green shoes with the high heels that tapered to the size of a fingertip. Father pulled out a chair for her. Mother moved swiftly around her between counter and table.

The only other sound was the busy scuffing of Mother's shoes against the linoleum. She'd tracked in a lot of dirt so her rubber soles didn't make their usual squeaking sound. She moved past Mrs. Burleigh with a plate of sandwiches. There were brown smudges on the bread. Her hands were still gloved with dirt.

"Sit," she said to Mrs. Burleigh, "sit sit." She touched Mrs. Burleigh between the shoulder blades. This seemed to nudge her to the ground and she moved to her seat beside Grandpa Kane.

"Well, I've got a peck of dirt to eat before I die," said Grandpa Kane, smiling jovially at Bryn and me and reaching for a sandwich. His brass cufflinks wiggled back and forth. Mrs. Burleigh laughed. Surprised, Bryn and I watched her face change shape. She placed her hands flat on the table to balance herself.

"Looks to me like you've died and gone to heaven, sugar!" she said, more softly, patting Grandpa Kane's belly with three fingers. She smiled and wrinkled her nose at Bryn and me. I imagined that great belly filling with dirt — $1/4$ peck — $1/2$ peck — $3/4$ peck — and a smudged sandwich settling on top. How large and hollow he looked compared to Father, whose shoulder blades we gripped like saddle horns when he gave us rides on his back at the lake.

Grandpa Kane's entire head flushed as Bryn and Mrs. Burleigh and I laughed. Father smiled and looked out the window and back at Grandpa Kane. He looked like a man listening at a closed door.

Mother took her seat after washing the silverware. She gave everyone a wet spoon. I turned mine over and looked at my reflection. My eyebrows were stretched up. I looked troubled, trapped.

“Dad, did you ever shoot a possum?” I said. The face in the spoon moved its mouth silently along with mine.

“Possum,” said Father, “hm.” He nodded and looked at the air in front of him as if he saw the possum there.

“Possums are marsupials,” he said. “I shot one out of a tree once.”

“Possum possum possum possum possum,” chanted Bryn. Whenever he learned a new word he seemed to think he’d invented it himself. “Hey,” he said. “When you say it over and over and over it sounds like you’re saying ‘sumposs sumposs sumposs.’ Doesn’t it?”

Mrs. Burleigh laughed.

“And what if a possum,” said Grandpa Kane, “mated with a sumposs, what would you have?”

“A musspop!” cried Bryn. We laughed. Mother’s hand shook as she lifted a spoonful of soup to her lips. I turned from her and tickled Bryn’s side.

“You’re the musspop,” I said.

“No, you are,” he said, squirming. “You are.”

Mother hated it when Bryn and I tickled each other and usually said, “enough” when we did. She lifted her spoon and touched it to her lips and pulled it suddenly away. Then the only sound was Mrs. Burleigh’s gentle, ebbing laughter, which had started out with such a hearty clatter. She covered her mouth with a napkin. I felt tired and bitter.

“Why did you shoot one out of a tree once?” asked Bryn. He always repeated Father’s entire sentences when he asked him questions, especially about hunting. I imagined Father in his camouflage suit aiming, one eye squeezed shut, up at the tree, imagined him nudging a dead possum with the toe of his boot.

“They carry their young in a pouch,” said Father, glancing away from Bryn. “When I turned over the body I found the babies still alive inside.”

He narrowed his eyes at the lamp that hung over the table. He moved his jaw back and forth.

“What did you do,” I said. I imagined he’d kept those baby possums in a box in his closet, and reared them up, and let one into the chimney to live.

“Of course they were too tiny to shoot,” he said. “They didn’t have a chance.”

After clearing the table, Mother turned to us with the chrome coffee

pot in her right hand. "Careful, the coffee is still hot," she said, "and these fancy china cups are thin. Don't you burn yourselves."

When she reached around Grandpa Kane with the coffee pot I could see a reflection of Bryn and me in the chrome. We looked like we were underwater. I nudged Bryn and pointed at the coffee pot. He smiled wisely. He took a deep breath, blew up his cheeks, and swayed slowly side to side.

"That's what you look like," he said, letting out his breath and smiling sideways at me. Shyly, he ducked his head.

"Uh uh, that's what *you* look like."

We nudged each other with our elbows.

"It's you, no it's you, is not it's you, no sir it's you."

We laughed and punched and pushed and tried to knock each other over. My chair tipped over to the right and we tumbled, dizzy and blind, to the floor. Father's chair scraped. He stepped over Bryn and me, catching my hair under the heel of his boot and pulling it. I sat up. Mother grabbed Bryn's chair to steady herself. Her face was greyish, and her eyes had that private, pained look. I watched her arm lower under the weight of the coffee pot until coffee trickled from the spout and was channeled into the grooves in the linoleum. Father placed a flat hand between her shoulder blades to steady her, took the coffee pot and placed it on the counter, and moved back to his seat.

Grandpa Kane was talking endlessly, deliriously, his voice far, far away and hollow as if he were speaking through a long pipe.

"Healed of all ills," he was saying, "including dyspepsia, nervous debility, constipation, neuralgia, whooping cough, astigmatism, and a train of other discordant manifestations."

Mother leaned against the counter and watched his face.

Grandpa Kane was the first to speak after I told about the possum. He inhaled. I inhaled with him.

"Imagine," he said, "being born a possum in a dark chimney. Your world a chilled, soot-lined purgatory. Your sky framed in a square of brick. The household below you a prohibited territory, populated by strange, pale-faced beasts who shine blinding lights in your eyes. Your mother a mute, white marsupial."

He exhaled and looked at us as if he'd just got rid of the possum. Mrs. Burleigh shuddered and hugged herself.

"Course," said Father, "never have heard of a possum nesting in a chimney."

“She’s in there,” I said. “She loves it in there. She loves the soot.”

Mother looked at me.

“A nesting possum?” she said. “Is this possum going to have a litter up there?”

I got up and went to the living room. Bryn followed.

“I believe you,” he said. He watched as I lay down on the cardboard and shone the flashlight up the chimney. The possum shook her head and bared her teeth.

“There she is,” I said. Bryn ran off. I shook my head and bared my teeth right back at the possum.

When Bryn came back I moved over so he could lay beside me. He held his Polaroid Instamatic over his face. There was a scratching sound. Soot fell over my face. I squeezed my eyes shut and held my breath. “Hurry,” I said, “hurry.”

Mrs. Burleigh’s sudden, rocking laugh sounded like it was moving away from us. “A gun under the tablecloth!”

“The gun,” said Bryn. “Mrs. Burleigh found the gun! We’re in for it.”

The cinders pinched my eyes, but felt very soft and gentle on my skin. I wanted to lie there, blind, face to face with that possum, until the soot had stopped falling and Mrs. Burleigh had stopped laughing.

I heard the camera click and whir. Bryn’s voice came from far, far away. “Come on out, the picture’s developing.”

I crawled out, blinking, hugging the flashlight under my arm. Bryn ran into the kitchen. I followed, eyes still stinging from the soot, tears running down my cheeks. Bryn waved the photograph at Father.

“Wait till you see,” he said.

Mrs. Burleigh’s pale hand was draped over the gun. Gasping and smiling, she sculpted the tablecloth around it so that we could see the shape. Her hand was on the butt of the gun. The barrel was pointed at Grandpa Kane’s belly. I imagined Grandpa Kane deflated on the floor, a peck of dirt piled around him.

Mother’s chair scraped loudly as she stood up.

“Who put the gun under the tablecloth?” she said. “Who put it there?”

I inhaled. I lifted my chin and smiled at her.

“Me,” I said. “I put the gun under the tablecloth.”

I laughed.

“That’s enough,” said Mother. “Stand up.” I stood up and faced her,

wiping the tears from my cheeks. She grabbed the hair on both sides of my head and pulled.

“Just *who*,” she said, pulling harder to emphasize the word, “just *who* do you think you are?”

She twisted the hair twice. As I began to sob she moved her hands to my face, rubbing my cheeks to get rid of the soot.

“Ugly,” she said through clenched teeth. “Ugly.”

She released me and turned to the counter.

Simultaneously, as if we were two cogs turning in a machine, I turned to the table, lifted the tablecloth in front of Mrs. Burleigh, and placed my hand on the gun. Mrs. Burleigh gasped. I watched her face as I drew it out. I backed away, stood with my right side to the table, and slowly aimed at each person, turning my head with the gun, drawing a tight, imaginary circle clockwise around them. They froze as if posing for a snapshot. The clock ticked fifteen times into the silence.

I turned carefully around, opened the tablecloth drawer, placed the gun on the pile of folded tablecloths, closed the drawer, turned back to the table, and sat down in my chair. I felt weary and relieved.

Beside me Bryn rocked gently back and forth, blinking fiercely at the black-eyed apparition in the photograph.