

Kat's Sanctuary

Natalie James

There was once a seaside town full of character and greenery, with magnificent tree canopies providing shade and beauty for the small population who resided there. For the wildlife residents it was more than comfort and aesthetic, the trees were life, providing food, shelter, rest and safety.

As a holiday destination, city people frequented the area to enjoy the serenity and beautiful beaches. But over the years tourist numbers increased, along with house sales. Bush blocks were subdivided, quaint beach houses demolished, and the development of large scale mansions with manicured gardens began. These monstrosities came to be known as 'concrete palaces'.

The wildlife disappeared along with the trees. They were forced to move on. Only some species of possum remained, able to adapt to the growing inhospitable landscape. But it wasn't easy.

One crisp winter's morning, a female Brushtail possum was awoken from her slumber in the hollow of an old tree - her home for many years. The changing landscape had left her territory bereft of trees and she managed to get by scouring roof tops and fences, and foraging in bins and any garden spaces remaining.

Men arrived in noisy trucks with their tools of destruction.

Her instinct was to get away from the terrifying sounds, leaping from branch to branch as they were torn out from under her.

“Dance vermin,” gibbered the chainsaw-wielding maniac, as the men below laughed.

Driven to jump three metres down onto a nearby fence, she ran along the top as fast as she could, dragging her newly injured leg behind her. She kept on running until she left the noise and hostility behind her.

As the sun broke through the clouds she found herself in unfamiliar territory, and a feeling of dread washed over her.

There was nowhere to take refuge. There were different noises, getting louder and louder, closer and closer. There was no time to rest her weary body and throbbing leg. She pushed through the pain and continued on. Then suddenly, there was nothing.

Later that morning, while travelling along a newly upgraded freeway, local wildlife carer, Kat, spotted a large Brushtail lying by the side of the road.

Pulling over and parked in the emergency lane, she waited for a break in traffic to check the possum.

“Oh no”, she cried, determining there was no sign of life.

Yet nestled within her pouch, curled tightly into a ball, a baby, miraculously alive. She gently removed and transferred him to a cloth pouch and then into a basket in her car. He cried. He cried with a grief that would break the coldest hearts.

The baby possum was affectionately named Robbie and was cared for over the coming months by Kat. He was loved and fed, and housed according to his developmental stage, but nothing could replace what he would experience and learn with his mum.

He never got to cling to his mum's back as she climbed and jumped. He never got to sit beside her copying her every move, learning what to eat, what not to eat, learning about predators, communication and simply how to survive. He missed her washing his fur.

He would have to make it in the world with only his instincts to guide him.

Five months later Robbie was released with his nest box, in place of a hollow, on Kat's property. He experienced height for the first time, as well as the intimidatingly large night sky.

In the rapidly developing neighbourhood, her little house stood nestled within dense bush on a double block, which would have blended seamlessly with the natural landscape of old.

While the newer houses boasted modern design, and heated swimming pools replaced backyards and decade old trees, Kat's place exuded a sense of tranquillity and connection to the land. Beyond the safety of her sanctuary many possums fell victim to the dangers lurking in the anthropocentric world, their lives cruelly cut short by dogs, cats or cars. Unfortunately, even those that called her place home needed to travel beyond the perimeters.

Robbie was only in his second year of life when his world was turned upside down.

He ventured into the grounds of a newly built holiday rental property where he encountered a wolfish dog, not part of the usual landscape he had meticulously come to know. Startled and unprepared, he found himself running toward the fence. He felt the dog's teeth sink into his tail pulling him back. The dog's grip tightened and tore his tail away from his body. In a flurry of fur and blood Robbie managed to escape through a small opening in the fence.

Disorientated, he found himself in a dimly lit yard, lush with vegetation. He took refuge in a little garden shed at the back of the property.

He reappeared days later feeling vulnerable, exposed and weakened without his tail, which acted as a necessary fifth limb.

He was also hungry.

Making his way out of the shed with a mixture of pain and determination he realised where he was – Kat's sanctuary.

Currently unable to climb he foraged on the ground, eating weeds and grasses.

Over time he learned to compensate for the loss of his tail, relying on his heightened senses and building up his strength and speed.

Three years on Robbie bears the scars of his struggles and faces ongoing challenges frequently, as new younger males fight him and chase him, over food, territory or mating rights.

Kat has watched on helplessly as he is knocked to the ground from great heights, slapped around by the resident female refusing his advances, turning up with a new scar, half an ear, or bleeding from various wounds... she doesn't see him as much as she used to, suspecting he's laying low or recovering from the latest fight.

But it seems to her that some of the younger possums bear an uncanny resemblance to this resilient orphaned warrior she called Robbie.