

The Reclusive Possum

The narrow window was level with the turf. Paul found himself staring out of this window because he was bored, bored, bored. He watched a squirrel hop across the grass toward the surrounding wood. The little creature was as confident as if he was on his neighborhood sidewalk. Step on a crack and break your mother's back, he thought for it. He coughed and sat up straight. On the chair beside his desk was a gigantic stack of Bro. Ross' books Paul had read at least a dozen times each.



The bored reader sighed. After a mighty stretch, he sighed again. And went to his own small bookcase beneath the narrow window. He brushed his hands over the dusty tomes. It often gave him comfort, and sometimes inspiration. But not now. Both were a no-show. Mostly. He still felt some pride in them. Paul was proud of the books he still owned. Among these top-tier items were his near complete collection of C.S. Lewis and

J.R.R. Tolkien works. All of this was a bit too bookish for a boy of 21, he knew that. Until two years ago, he'd spend most of his time that wasn't studying for college or working to pay for it in front of the T.V. or computer.

Through the small overhang beyond the window, he saw that the wind had picked up and was blowing across the field. He could see the squirrel making a mad dash to a tree as the rain increased. Surprisingly, the usually graceful creature stumbled at the roots, falling and hitting his head rather hard on the trunk. Like a champ, he regained his composure and proceeded to the dry safety of a secret tree-cave in the branches. Except for the clumps of grass, the field was now relatively empty.

He knew that Bro. Ross would be coming soon. It was unfortunate, because the man did not like Tolkien. Paul didn't cotton to folks who didn't cotton to Tolkien. Kidding. Bro. Ross was just fine for an older fellow. And he still had a very good library of books. He even had a great collection of 23 versions of the Bible, most of which he read every week. Paul had always looked up to him. Plus, he was in charge.



Everyone here took turns working in pairs to do necessary tasks. Today he and Bro. Ross would be doing something—he didn't know what it would be, but he definitely knew it was something because that is what it always ended up being. The dreaded "knock" rapped against the hollow door. Bro. Ross and his ancient face was behind the knock.

"Now before you say anything, anything whatsoever," said Paul, "know that anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

"I'll take my chances. You smell that smell?"

"What, the smell of something dying? I assumed it was you."

"That smell, my young friend, is a dead possum in the basement. You think it smells bad here, wait till you get a whiff up close and personal."

"I don't think so. I'm staying as far away from that odor as possible."

"No you're not. It's our turn. C'mon, it's in the basement, won't be that big a deal." Without waiting for a reply he turned and headed down the hall.

Paul followed. "Seriously, though, it's been smelling up the place for several days and we're the ones who have to do something about it?"

"To tell you the truth, some of us couldn't really tell. I definitely couldn't. Horrible sense of smell."

"I've still complained. I never would have thought that was dead possum smell. Smells more like old sewage."

"Nevertheless, I Didn't really smell it until I checked the furnace in the basement a few minutes ago. Holy cow, it stunk down there!"

"Ah, the epicenter, as it were."

"Epicenter. Fancy words for a teenager. That's why just reading books is not such a bad thing."

As they passed down the dark and rusty hall, a door opened. Jason poked his head out and set a box beside the door.

"I'll be taking this to the kitchen." In a previous life, Jason and his wife, Jennifer, were clearly a well to do middle aged couple. Paul knew this because after evening church service they had often taken him and other congregants out to an amazingly nice restaurant and out on the town—their treat. One time they had taken a short flight about the city on their private airplane as they watched the Super Bowl. Paul wasn't sure how they coped with these new conditions, but it was what it was and they seemed relatively content.

Bro. Ross told him what they were doing, about the dead possum and all that. "Just a sec, I'll come with you. I want to see

this thing.” He went back in to tell his wife and then the three headed downstairs. Bro. Ross urged him to bring his box. On the way down, Bro. Ross thrust his forefinger into the air with exaggerated drama. “Hear this, hear this now: And we shall love the pursuit, and the pursuit shall be our own.” The other two laughed slightly, mostly politely.

“Kind of dramatic,” said Jason.

“What does that even mean?” asked Paul.

“That’s from one of my poems,” said Bro. Ross, “I’m putting it into the novel I’m writing. Pretty artsy, don’t you think?”

“Excellent,” said Paul. “You know who else put poetry in their stuff? Tolkien! You, my friend, are imitating the master.”

“Uh, no. I don’t imitate hacks.”

“Hack? I’ll show you some hacking.”

“Guys, guys, calm down. Just don’t waste too much paper, bro. Ross,” said Jason.

“You’ll be happy to know I’m not using any. It’s in my head.” Bro. Ross continued as if he had not been interrupted. “You might take it—my quote—in the context of the story. In the story it refers to the pursuit of truth. In the case of the guy in my story, a detective, it means discovering what you see as not true be actually the truth.”

“That’s weird,” said Paul. “If it’s not true, it’s not true. Something that is not true can’t ever be true. That only works if you don’t believe in objective truth.”

“That also might work if you think something is true or not true, but actually turns out to be the complete opposite. That’s the angle I’m going for. None of that relativity stuff.”

"I see. That didn't seem right for a former pastor."

"It's good to clear up straw men like that. Otherwise, it creates friction where it's really not deserved."

"Well, aren't we a verbose bunch," Jason broke in. "Bro. Ross, don't talk about any more deep stuff right now or we'll never get this done."

Bro. Ross had his hand on the basement door. "Good idea. Okay, you guys might want to hold your breaths or hold your noses or something. It gets pretty bad from here on out."

"I hate holding my breath," said Jason. "Sometimes I get all panicky just thinking about it. I'm especially fond of air."

"Let's just be men about this thing," said Jason.

The three men ascended the basement stairs. The body of the possum lay at the bottom near the wall.



"Ah, the reclusive possum!" said Paul.

"Well, that's interesting," said Bro. Ross.

"What's wrong?" said Jason

"I could have sworn it was over by that wall. Anyway, hold your box so I can get this in," Ross commanded Jason. Just over the opening of the box, Bro. Ross slid the animal off the shovel. It somehow missed the target and fell with a plop at his feet. He screamed like a little girl and then laughed it off nervously. "That was a little startling."

Bro. Ross gingerly turned the animal over with the shovel.

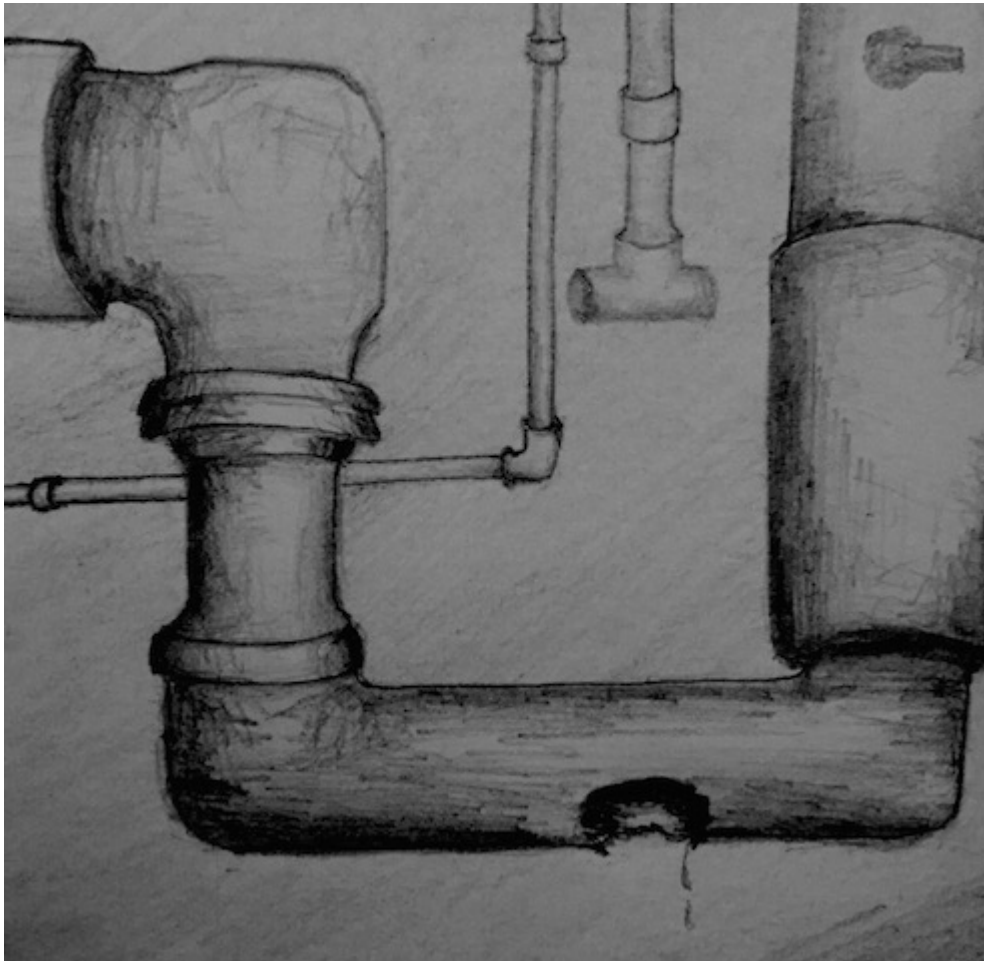
Paul and Jason shuddered at the sight of the razor sharp fangs and the cavernous mouth gaping up at them. They were both certain that at any moment the creature would come to life and tear the three of them to shreds.

"Watch it! Those things can kill a dog, you know," said Paul. "That is, live ones can. I have a really bad feeling it's not exactly dead."

"Just mostly, dead, right?" said Jason.

"I read that possum's do emit a smell when playing dead but the smell isn't all that bad. I think what we smell is that poop and urine trickling out of the ground over there."

"Yeah, it's the sanitation system. Some of the boys were going to check that out tomorrow."



"However you look at it, this guy's one of the deadest things I've ever seen," said Bro. Ross. He was frustrated and still embarrassed about his girl-scream.

"Look!" shouted Paul. The possum's tail dangled out of the top of the box and swayed almost sentiently back and forth. It attached itself to a bedframe sitting against the wall. "You can't tell me that that tail is attached to a dead thing."

"I'm sure it's just reflexes or nerves or something like that," said Jason.

"Of course, that's it," said Bro. Ross. To Paul's horror he raised the shovel and began pounding the tail. It soon uncoiled itself.

Bro. Ross ran up the steps and opened a rear trap door for Jason. Ross quickly opened the back door through which the

wind blew. They left the underground bunker.

“Go! Go! Go!” shouted Bro.

Paul held Jason back. “Listen, I’ve read that possum’s are super good at playing dead. I don’t know that this guy’s really gone.

Maybe we ought to—“

Bro. Ross and Jason both sighed heavily.

“Look, we’ll just put him in that big ditch in the woods,” said Bro Ross. “It’s not like we’re going to bury him. If he’s alive—which he’s not—he can always get out of the ditch as easy as you please.” The three walked through the woods. They all new exactly the hole Bro. Ross was talking about. It was actually an old trench dug by the enemy during the first war but long abandoned. Now they used it as a carefully disguised rubbish hole.

When they came upon the ditch there were two human bodies near the bottom: two soldiers. Soldier One had clearly stabbed Soldier Two to death. However, Soldier Two had also clearly not gone down without a fight. The other lay on his stomach near the top of the opposing edge of the ditch. A stream of now dried blood ran down to the bottom.

None of the three were all that surprised. It had been a week since they had heard a lot of gunfire and heavy artillery in the near distance. They all knew something was going on in the valley.

Bro. Ross left them. He walked around the hole and hunkered down by Soldier Two for a closer inspection.

“Yep, dead as a doornail, my friends. Got him right in the cheek. Went out the other side of his head. Must have bled out.” Then he walked a little further on to where the trees cleared and the descent into the valley begun.

"I'm just gonna..." said Jason. Paul released the box as Jason lowered and tipped it. The possum rolled to the bottom of the hole, its head nestling against the shoulder of Soldier Two. Then they joined Bro. Ross. Down in the valley was the scene of a battle: Uprturned earth, deep tank tracks, bodies, and many birds picking the scraps of the week-old battle victims. The once green valley was all decimated. Directly at the bottom from where they stood, the huge blackberry bushes where the group had spent hours was now lifeless, having been beaten into the ground by the rolling tanks.

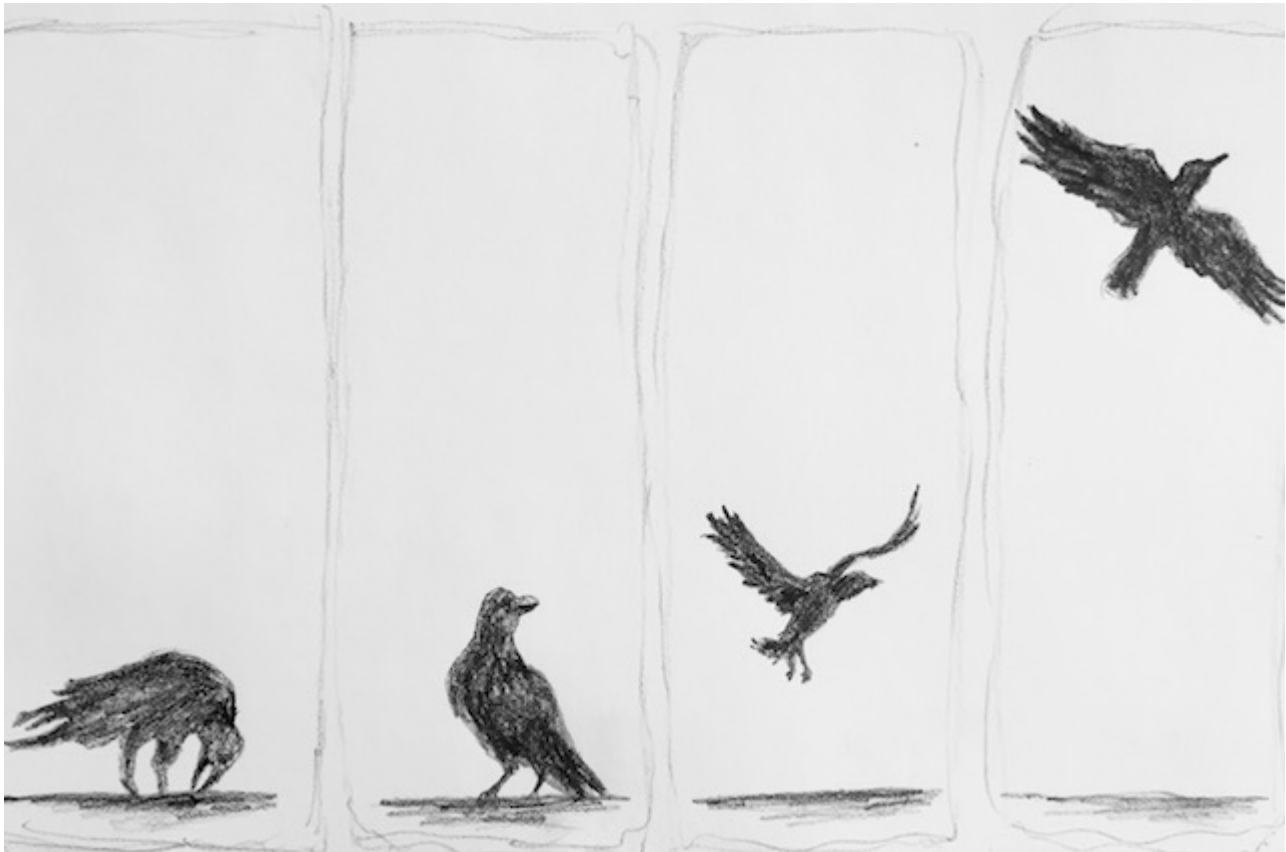
"Well, no more blackberries for a while," said Jason.

"Or ever," replied Paul. "There won't be anything left at the end of this war."

"Seventh war," added Bro. Ross. "Things are actually not all that bad, considering."

"That's easy for you to say," said Jason. "The rest of us? We've been going through an electronics hangover for two years. Two years! No computers, no T.V., no smartphones, no batteries...no airplanes. I really miss my airplanes."

Bro. Ross made no reply. The trio stood in silence for several more minutes. Then they descended into the reeking, war-torn valley to check for survivors. They looked for several hours. They found nothing except the birds and a few wild dogs eating the decomposing bodies.



"You'd think someone would collect their dead," said Jason.

"You'd think," replied Bro. Ross. "That's the way it is these days. No one cares about the dead, only the living. It may be risky, but tomorrow we'll plan to do something with them."

The three trudged up the hill. The two human bodies remain where they lay. The possum was gone.

"Guess you were right, Paul," said Bro. Ross. "Don't let it go to your head. C'mon, the girls will have supper ready soon."

"I guess there is hope," said Jason.

"Yeah, probably," added Paul. Paul imagined the possum crawling out of the ditch. It had splashed in the nearby pool and sloshed its way to safety. In his mind's eye it disappeared into the thick holly bushes that stood in its way. Something was resurfacing from the depths of his heart and mind, reviving. He felt that surely there would be a future

resurrection.