

Wild Things

BY RENATA HOPKINS



It was getting late when we arrived at the bach. Dad's workmate had described it as rustic. Rusty, more like. The flaking paint looked like a skin disease, and the roof was ancient.

"Seriously?" Fleur said. "Marina's bach has two storeys and a pool."

"This one has electricity and running water," Dad said. "Flash, eh?"

Fleur did an epic eye roll like she was trying to see her own brain.

"Can you just unlock it?" she asked. "I'm busting."

Dad pointed at something half-hidden in the trees. Fleur's face went hard. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Depends," said Dad. "Do you think it's an elves' clubhouse or a long drop?"

"You are not funny!" Fleur screamed. Dad looked at me, hoping for backup, but I hate long drops, too, because ... you know ... wētā. Actually, the whole place was creeping me out. The bach felt gloomy and secretive, as if it had snuck off into the bush to die.

While Fleur stomped off to the loo, Dad found the bach keys. Inside smelt of mice and old jigsaw puzzles.

"It'll freshen up once we've opened some windows," Dad said. His voice sounded cheerful, but his face didn't match.

It was dark by the time we'd unpacked. Fleur moaned the whole time. First, because there was only one bedroom. Then because she found fresh mouse droppings under the beds. "Don't blame me if a mouse runs up the duvet and over your face while you're asleep," she said to Dad.

But it wasn't a mouse that woke us. It was another noise. It sounded as though someone with asthma was choking on a mouthful of cornflakes right outside my window. I froze.

"What the unholy is *that*?" Fleur's voice came out of the dark, making me jump. She crept over to my bed and climbed across my legs.

"Ow!" I whispered, but Fleur ignored me and twitched back the curtain. Outside, we saw a dark shape hunched on the picnic table.



"Whoa," Fleur hissed. "That's a monster."

"What kind of monster?" I was so petrified that my fingertips prickled.

"A possum, you doughnut," Fleur said. The creature turned its head, and its eyes glowed demon red in the moonlight.

Suddenly, Dad sat bolt upright and made a loud woofing noise. Fleur and I gaped at him. "Dad just barked," Fleur said, and we both started to laugh. In no time, we were doubled over, snorting and hiccupping, with tears running down our cheeks. Meanwhile, Dad had climbed out of bed and gone into the lounge. We heard rummaging in a cupboard, some grumbling, and then the sound of the sliding door opening.

"Clear off!" Dad shouted. Through the window, we saw something fly towards the possum.

We scrambled off the bed and ran outside in time to see Dad hiff another knobby missile. A potato.

"That's like feeding it!" Fleur squawked.

"It'll want an apple for pudding!"



"No, look," Dad huffed, chucking another spud. "I've got it on the move." The possum had loped off into the mānuka, but it was still there, waiting.

"Try barking again," Fleur sniggered, but this time, I didn't join in. I felt like the possum was sending a telepathic message: This place is mine. Get lost.

The next morning, Fleur and I went looking for Dad's ammo. We found one spud on the lawn and another in the scrub.

"It hasn't even had a nibble." Fleur sounded disappointed. "What a fussy eater." She walked further into the trees. "Attention, mutant possum," she said, loudly. "We have a trap and are not afraid to use it."

"Do we?" I asked, but Fleur was focused on her imaginary audience. "We also have a large dog called Dad," she added. "Be very afraid."

"Do we really have a trap?" I repeated.

Fleur's eyes went all sharp and ferrety. "Let's make one," she said.

Honestly, I didn't want anything to do with the possum. Even in the daytime, last night still felt like a bad dream come to life.

"It knows we're here now," I said. "It probably won't come back."

Fleur smirked. "You're scared of it," she said.

"Am not."

"Prove it." She grabbed me by the wrist and towed me towards the back of the bach. "Help me dig a trap."

"Dig one?" I said, but Fleur didn't explain until she'd found a shovel and spade in the wonky lean-to.

"Here's the plan," she said. "We dig a hole on that little path through the trees where it ran off last night. Then we cover it with sticks and newspaper and leaves and stuff."

I felt sorry for the possum then. I wouldn't want Fleur after me with her evil, mastermind brain. On the other hand, digging a trap sounded quite commando and cool.

It took ages. Fleur kept saying it had to be deeper, otherwise the possum could jump out. Dad reckoned the possum would sense the hole with its superpowers and go round it. But he also thought he could read in peace if he just let us dig.

"We'll bait it before bed," Fleur said once we'd finally finished. "With some fruit."

"But what if we actually catch it?" I asked.

"We'll train it to do tricks," Fleur said. "Or make a pie. We can decide later." She hadn't moaned about the bach all day.



That night, we were woken by a noise. For one half-asleep second, I thought it was the possum again, but it was just Dad snoring. Fleur got out of bed and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” I whispered.

“To check the trap.”

“We’d hear scuffling if we’d caught it,” I said, but Fleur the big-game hunter was already gone. I grabbed the torch from under my pillow and followed.

We were halfway to the trap when we heard it – that hideous gargling sound somewhere above us. I swung the torch beam round the horror-movie trees until we found the possum perched on a branch. Those feral eyes looked like they could shoot lasers.

Things went a bit crazy then. Fleur picked up a broken branch and threw it like an actual spear. It smacked into the tree trunk right next to the possum, which took a flying leap. We both screamed. I dropped the torch. There were scuffling noises as the possum landed in the next tree, then the sound of a branch snapping, then a thud. Fleur snatched up the torch, and I saw the possum scurry into some ferns.

Behind us, we heard the door slide open. “What’s going on?” Dad shouted.

“Come on! It’s escaping!” Fleur charged after the possum, and I followed, but a branch caught my T-shirt, yanking me back. As I fought it off, there was a crashing sound to my left, followed by a loud swear word.

“Fleur!” I shouted. “Bring the torch!”

We found Dad sitting on the edge of the trap, rubbing his ankle. “I could have broken my leg,” he growled.

“Sorry,” I said. “We thought you knew where the hole was.”



“The camouflage was too good,” Fleur said, proudly. “I knew it’d work.” Dad looked pretty feral himself then, but Fleur didn’t seem to notice.

“Can we have a midnight feast?” she asked. “Since we’re all awake?”

The next morning, Dad made us fill in the hole. Next, Fleur wanted to search for possum burrows, but Dad said no more pest control. That night, he made earplugs for everyone out of rolled-up tissues. He said we’d had enough nocturnal drama and we had a long drive home in the morning.

After breakfast, we carried stuff out to the car. That’s when we found the message from the possum: a small greenish-brown nugget, right in the middle of the bonnet. Fleur looked impressed. “You win,” she announced to the trees. “But we’ll be back.”

Dad could have rubbed it in, about how anti she’d been, but he just smiled. I hoped we would come back. The bach was still weird and scabby, but whatever. When the others went inside, I found an apple in the food box and rolled it into the scrub. Possums sleep in the day, but I sent ours a present anyway. Not bait, I told it. Pudding.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY DARON PARTON

Wild Things

by Renata Hopkins

Text copyright © Crown 2017

Illustrations by Daron Parton copyright © Crown 2017

For copyright information about how you can use this material, go to:
<http://www.tki.org.nz/Copyright-in-Schools/Terms-of-use>

Published 2017 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

All rights reserved.
Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 064 0 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 AUGUST 2017

Curriculum learning area	English
Reading year level	Year 5
Keywords	endangered species, environment, family holidays, humour, native bush, pest control, possums, predators, siblings, trapping