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Story of a Gumtree

There's a gumtree, an extremely large one, right outside my window. It is so large it gets stuck to all the other trees—it pushes them away, extends itself. Possums live there, or so Helen said. This was just yesterday when she was checking it out. I'd asked her over to put it to her straight—how things stand—but soon we'd got stuck in and things had moved themselves in the other direction.

Helen was standing at the back window looking out into the yard. The dusk was just getting started. She had walked around the place acting the part, clicking her tongue and nodding at the front room and the bathroom and the kitchen with the marble bench top that looked like it was made out of real marble but which I had already melted a hole in with the coffee pot. Where she finished up was with her hands on her hips, looking out the window.

Oh, she said. Will you look at that tree?

I was standing in the kitchen holding onto the door of the refrigerator. The outline of her body against the pink and grey light coming through the window had an effect on me and I had an idea what I'd like to do with her now. I was particularly taken with the bare back of her pale knees and the dirt around her heels where the straps had rubbed in.

Apparently there's possums? I said, letting go the fridge door.

I stood close behind her with both hands on her hips and my face in her neck. It was hot. She wore a cheap vanilla oil which filled my head fast but was sour on my tongue and there was dirt on the windowsill from somebody else's plants and a spider's web, torn down. Helen stepped away from me and opened the door to out the back. She stood at the top of the steps looking at the tree, one hand on the railing.

Oh yes, she said. Yes. There would be possums for sure.

I left her there, cogitating, and went back into the kitchen and took some olives from the fridge. They fell flat and cold into the bowl she had brought me for the house and I set the bowl on the table. I took the bottle of wine out of the fridge and the rum from the freezer and set those on the table too. I filled a bowl with ice and put it with everything else and then I sat on the lounge waiting for her to finish with the tree. I filled her glass with wine and used my fingers to fill my glass with ice because I thought I'd wait, take my time, but as soon as she sat down I poured the rum and got started in:

Listen, I said. I think the whole thing's really clear. We can go through the whole thing, but in the end I think it's clear. What I can manage.

I understand, she said.

She took a sip of her wine but it caught her in the throat and she coughed until water streamed from her eyes. I offered to get her something but she waved her hand and I sat back down. She took another sip more carefully this time, then she laughed and finished her wine all in one go and I relaxed because I could see now it would soon be over, this whole charade. I poured more out for both of us.

Gee you've got a hide, she said, patting my knee.

She shook her head and pushed her glasses up her nose with the knuckle of her forefinger and she laughed and she laughed and she laughed.

Perhaps she didn't laugh so much, perhaps this was the rum. I took a drink and it settled me. The thing was that day, I guess, there was the business with her hair. She'd cut it short and now it showed the grey underneath and this disturbed me. The top of her thighs beneath her black skirt, where I could see them when I leaned forward and turned my head to the side at a particular angle, had a crinkle to them and these small purple veins. I didn't mind these. The thing was the hair.

Well it's a real Australian house, she said. It's a real Australian house, with that tree.

You've got to try these olives, I said. Go on.

She took one olive and got going on the rest. That's what I really liked about Helen. My wife, towards the end, she wouldn't eat anything at all. I leaned over and kissed her. She pulled away, laughed again, took up another olive and put that in her mouth. When all the olives were gone she worked one finger in the oil, knocking about all the pips.

At some point between this conversation and the steak, the dark came fully down. Helen had made a salad and while I was cooking the steak she disappeared out the front door. I poured a fresh drink soon as the door clicked shut and took it down fast because I thought she'd be back immediately. I turned the steak. When the steak was finished I set it on a wooden board on the bench to rest and cleared the coffee table of the olive bowl and other things. I crunched some ice and stared into the sink, waiting for her to return. When she didn't come back I poured another drink. I took my time with this one. I put the radio on and sat down to take it in and that's when Helen came back with all these orange flowers which she rinsed and tore up and put in the salad. I took up the steak and cutlery and set it all on the coffee table next to the salad.

Helen sat down beside me and took up the knife but her hands were shaking too bad and I took it from her.

Oh my god, what's the problem? I said.

I started going at the steak pretty well myself, cutting it into fine, neat, clean strips. Helen took up the remote and turned on the television but she was looking to her right, out the window, at the gumtree. That did it. I stood up and went into the kitchen to freshen my drink. I took a drink to steady myself but I was so full on Sailor Jerry's, I was drinking to sober up. I'll put it like that, just what I was doing—I was so full on Sailor Jerry's only more of it could help. I filled up my glass with ice and felt better after that. Less rum would fit in: I told this to myself.

Do we have to? I said, sitting back down on the lounge.

So Helen turned the television off and in the quiet that came next I suddenly had a strange feeling like it wasn't my house, like the house didn't have anything to do with me at all, like I didn't belong and the house didn't want me there and also like I was about to beg for something when this wasn't the case. The food was on the table and Helen was beside me on the lounge and everything was happening like stacking boxes on a shelf, one next to the other, contained and very clear but the insides were a mystery. I was getting all ready to give it to her, what I had decided about this whole thing and what I was going to do, but when I started in this way her lips took an ugly turn and she put her head in her hands and her shoulders moved as she cried. She spilled it all out about her husband and her kids gone away and I knew I should put my hand on her back, to console her, but she was wearing a summer dress and the straps on the dress badly irritated me.

The straps slipped about as she told me at length of her fears. It was so boring. She had a mole by her right shoulder blade which had three fine brown hairs growing out of it and the hairs waved their hands at me like tiny arms in a breeze. I thought of taking each of these hairs and pulling them out, one by one. I thought of the baby—half her and half me—and this thought repulsed me physically in the way Christmas carols do when I can't stop listening.

They'll be back, I said. They love you and they'll be back.

But we were drinking like lunatics and no one was coming back. Plus I knew by then love didn't have anything to do with it.

We forgot about the steak. Anyway it had gone cold. I opened a packet of corn chips and that did the trick. We talked reasonably about our options to do with our relationship but then she fell asleep and I got to thinking what I could do with her now, out cold on my lounge in her strappy summer dress. Her breath was sloppy and wet because she was drunk in her sleep and

she cleared her throat occasionally, as she slept. For the first time I saw we were really alone in the house. She was asleep on my lounge and she belonged to me, in the now, this included what was inside of her, and I had the strong, happy feeling I could destroy it all anytime I felt like it. I lay down to think this over in more detail. Then I fell asleep.

In the middle of the night I woke up with Helen's head on my chest. I lay there for a few moments just breathing. My tongue was thick and there was a sour film over my teeth but my head was clear. I ran my hand over her hair, back and forth, and went through in my mind exactly what I had done. I hadn't done anything, in the end. I was so relieved. I was so relieved a bubble of air ascended from the centre of my chest and rose up my throat, as a laugh.

What's so funny? Helen said.

I've changed my mind, I said, trying to make it sound right.

Let's do it, I said. It will be all ours this time. We'll call it something good and we'll be happy with it. What's the worst that can happen? Might as well.

It didn't take. I thought for a moment she had maybe fallen back to sleep but then she sat up and felt around for her bag. I got up and turned on the light.

I've got to go, she said. I've got to get home.

She sat there a moment, using the tip of her finger to smooth one eyebrow and then the next. I saw the raw flesh on the edge of her thumb where she'd pulled the skin all the way down and I guess I had a feeling like love, something big opening up. But then she got up and walked out of the house and as she sat on the doorstep to do up her sandals I had a very clear view of the mess of her hair.

I went back inside and turned the steak into the plastic bag on the bench. I thought about doing a significant clean but the steak was as far as I got. I opened a beer and took it out into the lounge. Then I changed my mind and opened the back door. I finished the beer in the yard, walking back and forth on the strip of concrete under the stairs. I grew tired. I lay down on the grass and allowed my eyes to close.

The night air had a specific effect on my face. It was quiet but the leaves moved and the whole thing gave me a feeling like there was room for me after all and I began to slip away. But then I had the small, hard feeling I was being watched. I opened my eyes. Above me the leaves of the gumtree were a rusty canopy: they flickered the moonlight back and forth through the leaves and in the centre of it in the middle of a branch two still, black eyes peered down.

It didn't strike me right away exactly what she was but soon the shape of her became completely clear to me. I lay there like that, still as anything looking up. And for a long time, it seemed to me, the possum looked frankly down.

About the Author

Ashleigh Synnott lives in Sydney. Her stories and essays have appeared in print and online in publications such as *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *Antipodes*, and *Award-Winning Australian Stories*. Ashleigh is represented by the Jane Novak Literary Agency.