

Possum Woman

by Ashley Poulter

They always referred to her as the possum woman back home. She scoured the streets just as the sun fell into deep slumber behind the sentinel, sun tanned shoulders of the mountains encircling small town anywhere. Her mysterious black Hefty bag clung neatly to her wrist tied by a gnarled piece of chicken wire. Those deep purple splotches canvassed her arms to show the warranty of brave skin had long since expired and in its place stood something more tender and true.

Each night she moved down those creaky stairs, their small tight voices singing out into the night with warning for both creature and car alike. It warned them to proceed with caution, but not too much caution. Caution was nothing the possum woman cared for or desired as stumpy vein-ridden legs waded through the fields of raw grasses and sweet smelling hay. They bowed before her like peasants before the queen, and though they had no minds or hearts it was clear even the smallest of things knew which to follow and which to frown upon.

Approaching the roadside she gave but a single quick sniff of the foggy mountain air. Nostrils flexed to welcome air she swore came rolling fresh down from her mountains every morning. Glasses damp with moisture created a blariness she liked. Secure in the knowledge that the world surely wasn't a perfect place, it wasn't clear cut. Things were fuzzy around the edges and those idealized things had a little more wiggle room behind her glasses. And that was comforting beyond measure.

Along the mile stretch of straight and narrow roadway she plodded that primal path along the shoulder. Blue canvas shoes stirred up small puffs of soil, their toes threadbare and worn from the years of kicking the earth. Her mother always said you could tell the feistiness of a woman by the shape her shoes are in. The grittier they were, the more stories she had to tell. Especially if they were shoes built to last.

At the first possum she noted its death had happened not too long ago. Probably the morning or afternoon by the amount of insects still buzzing above the body in a frenzied flight like outcast angels, "You did well," she offered to the cold possum before scooping it up into the trash bag. It was the least she could do.

As the stars fizzled and found life against the deep blue sky she continued along the shoulder stopping by each possum. Over her glasses she examined the surroundings like a crime scene investigator, though her praise for the kill and swift, though sweet, betrayal of sobs over the death and life of an animal discredited her investigator status fairly quickly.

Upon reaching the end of the mile she turned around simply and walked back the path of possum hunt. There would be no more of the dead animals that night, or the desire to pick fresh kills up from the deformed black pavement. It was enough to have these in her bag. They were enough to make her happy with life for days to come and years in the larger scale of things.

Reaching the front steps again she relinquished the bag of possum to the top step and went inside to find her utensils. There were only a few of them, all handmade, and often thrown aside in favor of her two gnarled hands. Out in the shed she took out the possums and set to work.

It only took minutes to complete. The excess meat was stored away in the sputtering freezer for another day. In the rusty basin the skulls were buffed and polished by the threadbare rag she always used. Each small structure of bone was set on the windowsill looking outward onto the garden. Eyeless sockets pointed toward petunias and marigolds, foxgloves and irises. And though they could not see, it was still there. Going on without them as life generally did.

In the afternoon sun she carried the skulls one by one out onto the patio. A small brush and paints were placed on the tabletop and quietly the woman began to work. Each skull was given a distinct theme, the swirls and splatters of color weren't perfect. They weren't really good, either. Blobs of black and brown dribbled down the side of the small skulls and puddle at its base. By the days end

her own hands were covered in a subdued rainbow of blues and grays, patches of bruised skin fitting right in with the other colors.

Once the skulls had dried she placed them on the small table by the road. A few wildflowers were plucked and stems threaded through the cracks and eye sockets to add something special. Cars began slowing immediately as they usually did when she put the final touch against the table. The hand painted sign reading *possum skulls, \$5* never ceased to stir up curiosity.

An hour passed and all but one of the skulls was sold. The blacks, grays, browns, and maroons weren't exactly the most appealing when standing beside some of the brighter colored ones. Just as she rose from her spot on the porch a blue car pulled into the driveway with a gangly man emerging from the car. His gait slow and relaxed as he made his way over, hat removed respectfully.

"Why you paint them possum heads for? I seen you out here on the way to work picking them up off the road. Shouldn't you be worrying about painting real pictures or some such as that?"

Possum woman shrugged. People had asked her the same thing before and her answer, if dull, was always the same. "Don't think there's anything wrong with it. They deserve a second chance too. I know good and well them possums aren't the prettiest creatures God put on this earth, but they ain't the worst. Possums don't kill people, beat their wives, drink too much, steal, lie, cheat, or anything like that far as I know. So I can sit there and paint them pretty and make people think so too."

By the man's face he hadn't expected much from the woman. Maybe a shrug or sigh, shake of the head or just a simple stern look. What he received was a lot better than what he'd anticipated.

"They're awful pretty, m'am. Might I buy this last one from you?"

"Yes," she took the bill from his hands and stuck it into her breast pocket. "You just gotta remember to squint and blur a little in life." As the man pulled away from the house, skull in tow, she gathered the sign and went back inside in anticipation of more pretty possums to come her way.

