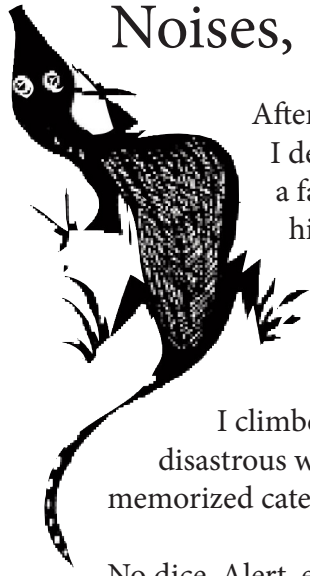


Noises, Off a rant by Susan Dworski



After a week from hell in which I lost time, equanimity, and a bunch of money, I decided to call it an early evening. As I snapped off the kitchen light I saw a familiar grey form slinking past the cat bowl: Old Mr. Possum. Our Guy, himself. Out for an evening stroll; making a pass at the Lamb Niblets for Seniors. Grabbing a kitchen towel, I flapped and he zoomed, around the perimeter of the office, knocking over piles of books and papers. One quick, loud *snapp*, and Mr. P. was history. Or, so I thought.

I climbed into bed, jonesing for sleep, trying to obliterate the highlights of my disastrous week by utilizing various ineffective Eastern breathing techniques and memorized catechisms from an array of esoteric disciplines.

No dice. Alert, eyes fixated, I scoured the ceiling, praying for insta-Nirvana. But it was Friday night in the hood. Helicopters hovered, car alarms blared, fire engines howled. Over the familiar cacophony I noticed another smaller, insistent noise. A repetitive *skrettchhh*, *skrettchhh*. It seemed somewhat desperate, and rather close. Too close, in fact. I grabbed my CA state-approved, all-purpose, earthquake patrol flashlight, and flashed the beam around to discover... Our Guy, Old Mr.P, clawing his way up the *inside* of the screen of my open bedroom window which gives onto his twiggy nest in the potato vine, some 20 feet above ground. Blinded by the bright light, he flattened himself against the screen, clinging to it maniacally with sharp talons. His beady near-sighted little eyes gleamed red in the torch, his pathetic, naked tail whiskering back and forth against the screening.

The glove was down.

The screen was locked onto the sill with a puny aluminum hook on a nail. It only took one attempt to see that my eight dolla acrylic Vietnamese fingernails wouldn't cut it. I repaired to the bathroom for some bandage scissors leftover from surgery and began to dig at the hook to free the screen. Old Mr. P, in mortal terror, jammed up into the top right corner of the screen, scrabbling desperately to escape, and executed a forceful, rear-guard action. Whether as much from fear or as a defensive ploy, he loosened his sphincter and squirted down an appalling stream of reeking black excrement, covering the window sill, the scissors, and my lacquered nails with hot, marsupial shit. I yelped and the flashlight rolled under the bed. Mr. P's tiny black eyes--and now his sharp teeth--glistened wickedly in the starlight.

Houston, this was serious. Thoughts of rabies and unknown infections raced through my brain. But, I couldn't abandon Mr. P to prowl around the house all night. He clearly wanted to go home and get his beauty sleep.

This was no time for wimps. Balling up my fist, I plunged it through the screen, busting it loose from the hook while deftly grabbing onto it at the same time so that it--and Our Guy--didn't plummet to the ground in a homicidal heap. The bent aluminum screen flew out into the darkness at an acute angle, Old Mr. P. hanging onto for dear life as he sailed forth. I caught it at

the very last moment. It swung back towards the potato vine, crashing into the thick leaves, and Mr. P, with a dexterity that caught me by surprise, segued from the screen to the foliage in one smooth scramble, disappearing into the thicket.

Naked, perspiring, bathed in possum shit, I held my breath, waiting for the next act. But no, all quiet in the nest. Our Guy was already snoozing.

Not me.

I showered until the hot water ran cold, made some strong, black coffee, wrapped myself in a blanket, and settled down on the front lawn on our Venice garage-sale French park bench under the protective branches of the pepper tree to wait for dawn, working on feeling serene--almost godlike--secure in the knowledge that yes, every creature was in its right place, ready for a new day.