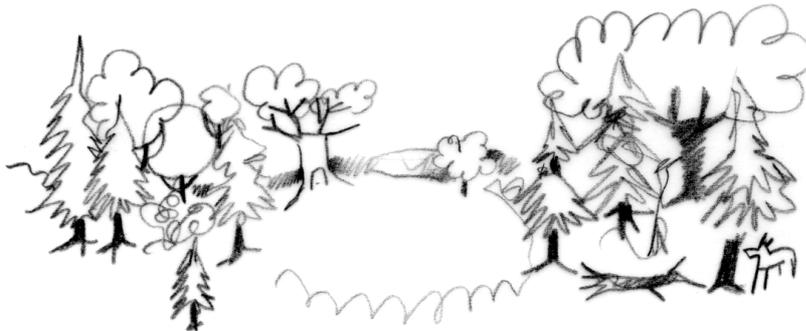


## CHAPTER 1

## POSSUM'S DREADFUL BIRTHDAY PARTY



It was Possum's birthday, and he was having a party. When it was time for his friends to arrive, he stood outside waiting to greet them, but the forest and fields were empty; not a creature stirred. "I hope they didn't forget my birthday party," he said to his friends Chipmunk and Robin, who were perched on a branch over his head.

Possum lived in The Great Forest, in an old oak tree, in a pretty little spot called Nannycatch Meadows.

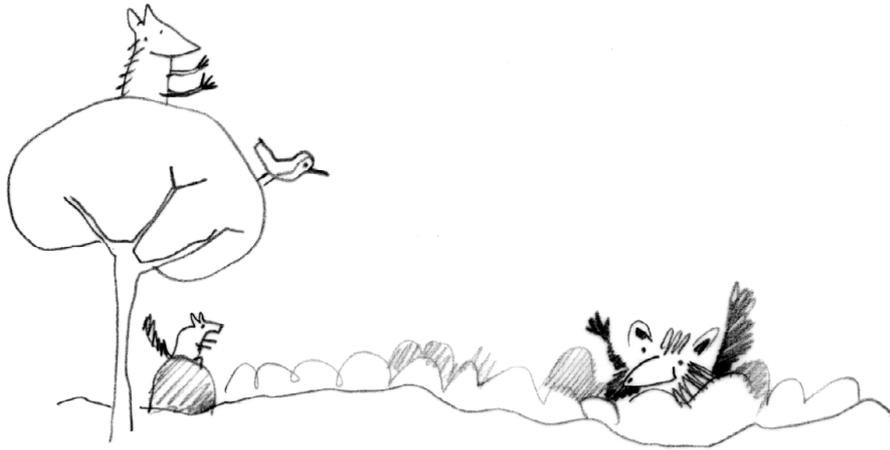
"I don't see anyone coming," said Robin. "Did you remember to send invitations to everyone?"

"Of course," said Possum.

Robin flicked her tail. "Then I am sure they will be here any minute."

"I will climb up beside you and watch for them," said Possum. He grabbed his binoculars and climbed into the thick, leafy canopy where his hammock swung

between two stout branches. Soon Possum could see Raccoon loping through last year's brown leaves towards his place. He spotted his friend Badger poking his head



out of a rusty pipe that had been left behind after the New Highway was finished. And there was Dormouse darting through the grass, looking over his shoulder to make sure Brown Owl wasn't about to swoop down and gobble him up.

"They're coming," said Possum with a sigh of relief.

Through his binoculars, Possum could see the New Highway in the distance, a broad ribbon of glaring concrete cutting a path through The Great Forest, through the neighbourhoods of Boggle Hole, Pokey Edge and Biskey Fen. The New Highway had changed everyone's lives in the three communities. "Don't go near the New Highway!" mothers warned their children. But the children needed no warning: the roaring monsters

with night-blinding eyes were scary enough to keep them away.

Now, on this bright spring afternoon, Possum could see his Uncle Possum strutting along beside the Highway, making his way to his nephew's birthday party. Uncle Possum lived in Grotty Bottom, not far from Nannycatch Meadows. Wheeled monsters swept by him with a roar. Uncle Possum shook his walking-stick angrily at the Highway monsters and lashed out viciously at anything obstructing his path, be it badger, bird or bush.

Just slightly ahead of Uncle Possum, Weasel shuffled slowly along, taking his time. He was nervous about the Highway traffic. Uncle Possum soon caught up with him and slashed the air with his walking-stick. "Out of my way, Weasel!"

Weasel jumped fearfully, slipped off the curb, fell onto the Highway and—whoops! A big truck ran over Weasel.

Possum dropped his binoculars and covered his eyes with his paws. He couldn't look. Weasel was flatter than a flatworm.

Possum turned to Robin. "Weasel just got flattened on the New Highway!"



"That's dreadful!" cried Robin.

"MOST UPSETTING," said Pigeon, who had a tendency to talk in headlines. He had just flown down from a high branch. "SAW THE WHOLE THING. MOST UPSETTING.

WEASEL CARELESS." Pigeon worked for the Pigeon Post and also delivered the daily newspaper.



Possum said, "This is terrible. Poor Weasel! What am I to do about my birthday party?"

"Search me," said Chipmunk.

"There's nothing much any of us can do," said Robin, wiping away a tear. "We should just continue with our plans. Weasel would wish us all to carry on, I'm sure."

"It will be a dreadful birthday party," said Possum, as his friends crowded into his hollow-tree home.

"Listen, everyone," said Possum, after all this guests had arrived, "Robin has sad news."

Robin perched on the handle of the kettle where everyone could see her. "Sad news, indeed. Weasel will not be here with us today. He met his end on the New Highway. He is no longer with us." Her eyes ran with tears. "Weasel, alas, is no more."

Everyone groaned. Many wept.

"MOST UPSETTING," said Pigeon.

"How sad," said Chipmunk.

"I saw the whole thing," said Hawk. "It was shocking."

"A tragedy, indeed," said Uncle Possum, helping himself to a chocolate biscuit when no one was watching.

"Bad stuff happens," sighed Dormouse.

They all bowed their heads as Badger said a prayer.

Then Mole, whose life was spent mostly in the dark, got up and said, "My heart is heavy. All creatures of The Great Forest must one day die; why, I do not know. Today it was Weasel's turn. Weasel told lots of fibs, but I shall miss him. My eyes are not good, as you all know. Weasel helped me find my way home whenever I got lost. I shall miss him very much."

"Weasel was kind," agreed Possum.

Rat (who hadn't been invited to the party) got up and said, "It is most regRATable that Weasel is no longer a member of this fRATernity. They say Weasel was sly. Well, maybe he was, but he was my friend. Weasel saved me once from Pit Bull's wRATH. Pit Bull was just about to snap my neck when Weasel bit his tail, and I fell to the ground and ran to safety. I will always be gRATeful to him."

"Weasel was brave and he was a good friend," Possum agreed.

Raccoon scratched his belly. "Weasel was my friend, too. He taught me all I know about stealing birds' eggs."

"Shame!" cried Robin.

"Weasel was my cousin," said Ferret. "He showed me the best places to find the most delicious bugs."

"Bugs are creatures of The Great Forest, too, you know!" yelled Earwig from a crack in the ceiling. His voice was so tiny that hardly anyone heard him.

"He shared with others," said Possum. "Weasel was generous."

"Weasel will be sadly missed," said Badger, echoing the feelings of everyone present. "Nannycatch Meadows will not be the same without him."

"Indeed, his death leaves an empty space in all our lives," said Possum.

"Not in mine!" yelled Earwig.

"Why must we die?" moaned Mole, shaking his head.

"I wish we knew the answer," said Badger. "We live and we die. That's all we know."

"Let us all drink a toast to Weasel," said Possum. "Please raise your glasses."

His friends raised their root beers.

"To kind, brave, generous Weasel," said Possum.

"To kind, brave, generous Weasel!" everyone cried.

"Now it's time for me to cut the cake," said Possum.

And that is what he did, and everyone had a jolly time, and it wasn't such a dreadful birthday party after all.

