

Animals Don't Live For Very Long

He was our very own cat Astrophe. The only cat I have ever known who could fall off a table onto his head. So he didn't like being up high, but then again he didn't like being on ground level. You would come upon him having a crisis under a bed. Or completely lost and yowling out in the back paddock. He would wander, but he could never find his way home.

The one good thing you could say about him is he didn't catch (and kill) wildlife. You want your cats to catch (and kill) rats and mice but oh dear, the guilt and shame when they bring in beautiful native animals or birds. Yodelling!

But the day came, Astrophe went the way of all flesh. Animals don't live for very long.

Other cats came along. Somehow or other we always seem to have a cat or two. And most of them fancied themselves as hunters and killers.

One night I heard a rustle in the peach tree and thought - one of the cats fooling around. Then a ring-tailed possum shinnied down the trunk and ran across my foot and up into the pin oak. They are the prettiest of creatures, but this one was perhaps a little too incautious. Because the next night one of the current crop of cats laid a ring-tailed possum on the hearth rug triumphantly.

We had a family meeting, something had to be done. Our next crop of cats had to be kept inside at night. We couldn't let them go on laying to waste the native populace. Not that the cats had it all their own way. Tiger saw herself as an Intrepid and Redoubtable Snake Slayer!

The last thing you want is Tiger dragging in a half dead snake. No. That is the second to last thing. The last thing you want is to find her body with two little pin pricks in her nose.

We'd just bought an ex-racehorse for Alice. Tom had a lot of dirt in him still and liked to hear her squeal. Once I was spying through the trees at them and he was backing up and being evil so I called out - "Tom! I can see you!"

Good as gold! Off he went! Butter wouldn't have melted etc.

Well, Tiger had been missing for a week. I had been searching the neighbourhood, looking in all the sheds in case she had been locked in somewhere. No luck.

Alice came home from school and set off on Tom. So I prowled round the garden in case something went awry, keeping an eye and an ear out for Tom Trouble.

Two minutes after she set off she was back at the gate, howling so hard she couldn't speak. I thought Tom had been a rogue and whirled around on her and come straight back home the way some evil horses will when they want to upset their kid.

Then she pointed down the road.

So I got a sack and screwing myself up for a gruesome sight - poor little Tiger squashed by a car - followed Alice and Tom.

But all she had was two little pin pricks above her nose. A snake had bit back.

Alice had only been able to see her in the long grass by the road because she was mounted up high on Tom. If Tiger had ran a couple of feet further into the pine trees we might have never found her.

And you always want to know. Otherwise you wake up in the night for months remembering another shed or garage that you haven't checked. It's best to know.

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Jennifer Compton had a splendid six months in residence at the Randell Cottage in Wellington (her home town) this year. She will not be returning to Wingello in the Southern Highlands - but to her new home in the foothills of the Dandenongs in Melbourne. She has recently had poetry and stories and essay/memoirs published in - *Poetry New Zealand, Island, Famous Reporter, Wet Ink, Quadrant, NZ Listener, Eureka Street* and *Cordite*.