



CHAPTER 2

THERE'S A RACCOON ON MY PROMOTION TOUR

A promotion tour for a new book is always hectic, as publicists with authors in tow or authors alone clutching maps and schedules race madly around to radio and television stations, newspaper and magazine offices, restaurants and bookstores. There can be breakfast interviews, lunch interviews and dinner interviews where you are so busy answering questions you have no chance to eat your meal; there can be days when you are so busy tearing around trying to be on time you have no meals at all. And then at the end of the day you have to pack your suitcase, gather up your books, take a taxi to the airport and fly off to another city where it all happens again. As the days and the cities go by, the studios, the offices, the corridors and the reporters all begin to look the same. Whatever you say on the first day sets the pattern for whatever you will say on the rest of the days.

In my case, I compound the problem by adding visits to schools and libraries, lectures to groups such as natural history societies, and research sessions at universities.

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Knowing that people of all ages remember a message better if the messenger is interesting, I like to take along an animal or two. Sam the seal, Rocky the raccoon, Tom and his sister cougars, Bubu the bear. Bun Bun the varying hare, Ludwig, Gomer and Ponderosa the tortoises and the rest of the crew at our Wildlife Conservation Centre have inspired both kids and adults to become naturalists, zoologists, biologists, veterinarians, writers, broadcasters or aware conservationists.

At this stage in his life, Tabasco appealed to everybody. Desks were emptied and microphones abandoned

whenever I took him out of his toque and tote bag. "May I touch him?" was always the first question. Even busy businessmen in pinstripe suits loved Tabasco. One CBC producer hurriedly ordered a taxi to bring her children to the studio before we left.

"You know," said Carolynn in surprise one day, "that TV interviewer today didn't even mind when Tabasco started to squawk on the show and threatened to drown him out on the air. And I nearly died when the raccoon defecated among the lipsticks on Irma's makeup table, but she didn't seem to mind a bit."

A famous writer once said that if a domestic animal loves you, it becomes your slave, but if a wild animal loves you, you become its slave. And so it was with Tabasco. He didn't open his eyes till we were two days into the tour and even then he had a pretty blurred view of the world. It was two weeks or more before he did much else than sleep between two-hour and then four-hour feeds. He was just a tiny fluffball snuffling into my toque or

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wobbling around on his delicate hands and feet, but he was surrounded daily by a retinue of adoring slaves. Secretaries strained his formula. Makeup girls minded him while I discussed the program. Salesmen weighed him on post office scales. Receptionists bathed him in bathroom sinks. Technicians encouraged him to exercise on the office floor and stood guard in case anybody stepped on him. Messenger boys scurried around looking for cups, warm water and paper towels. Other guests ran out of the studio to fetch supplies like baby oil for his dry skin. And busy hosts and hostesses cuddled him to sleep.

Despite the extra work and the many times interviews scheduled for fifteen minutes stretched into thirty

minutes or even an hour, causing frantic phone calls and taxi rides, Carolynn was enchanted. I heard her describing some of the highlights to her cohorts at Doubleday.

“Do you know that I have to bring a fresh egg to work every morning for Tabasco’s bottle—and hope that it doesn’t break all over my new purse? And yesterday I had to rush out to the Bay and buy a pair of nylons to strain the formula because the egg was too thick to go through the nipple! You should have seen the look on the faces of the clerk and the other customers when I ripped open the package at the counter, stretched the stocking over a cup and poured in the mixture.”

Tabasco had Carolynn and plenty of other caretakers during the day. At night back at the hotel, I left him in the bathroom while I flew down to the floor that had ice cubes, shovelled a bucketful out of the box and ran back

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to the room to keep his milk bottle cold between feeds. It was unseasonably hot that week in Toronto, so I usually stored his formula (Enfalac or evaporated milk laced with egg yolk and multivitamins) on the open window ledge of my room, buried in ice.

After a day of rushing around in my parka and sitting under hot studio lights in stage makeup, I threw off my shoes and stockings as soon as I hit the hotel room, and changed into something loose and comfortable before I buzzed the elevator. There were often double takes from the better dressed business types as I whizzed in and out of elevators in bare feet carrying my ice cubes and milk bottles. “How’s your baby?” some of them would say to start a conversation. “Fine, thank you, but it happens to be a raccoon,” I’d reply, but not stay long enough to see their reaction.

By the time we hit Winnipeg, Tabasco was nearly

three weeks old and had gained a couple of pounds. His eyes were open, he could dig his claws into things and climb up furniture and stockinged legs, and he wobbled around now after eating rather than going to sleep. He was developing quite a voice. To his “wuff, wuff, wuff” that said, “I like this nice warm stuff going down my throat” or “Now, how can I make myself comfortable?” he had added a strident, piercing trill that said, “I’m hungry” or “I’m lost” and a startled, rasping growl that said, “What’s wrong? What’s happening? Who are you?” Most of the time, though, he kept in contact with me by various kinds of chittering and I learned to communicate with him by chittering back.

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With a couple of hours to spare before we caught our plane out of Winnipeg, I took a taxi to visit Con and Dime Reilly in their beautiful riverside mansion. “You’d better mind your manners, Tabasco,” I admonished the raccoon.

Like most people. Dime thought he was cute, and even Con, who confessed to liking ducks more than raccoons, was impressed. Nevertheless, I decided to play it safe and keep Tabasco outside on the Reillys’ front lawn. He knew how to climb. He knew how to walk—backwards, that is. Now in his first long foray through grass he learned how to walk forwards. No longer did he just bumble around, he was beginning to have a mind—and a direction—of his own.

To this baby raccoon, the lawn must have looked like a forest. I thought that giving him plenty of exercise would tire him out and keep him quiet on the plane. But it had the opposite effect. He waddled around in the grass and climbed up Dime’s stockings. Con’s pant legs and my pantsuit. His long claws didn’t do much damage

to our skin but I couldn't say the same for nylon, polyester and silk. Then, because of the excitement perhaps, he developed diarrhea, which oozed down Con's arms when he picked him up for the ride to the airport.

Fortunately, we were still friends when I and my chittering raccoon said goodbye in the terminal. "Tabasco, shut up, tell me about it later. Right now I have to take you on another plane ride," I whispered into the tote bag en route to the airport washroom.

But he kept on chittering. I sat on the toilet seat and

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gave him his bottle. But he wasn't interested in drinking; he had found his legs, all four of them, and he wanted to explore the floor beyond the door. "Come back," I said, trying to keep my voice down and my raccoon hidden from curious people in the next cubicles. His inquisitive nose was just poking out into the main bathroom area when I managed to lean forward from my precarious position atop the toilet seat, scoop him up and pop him back in the bag.

Time was ticking away and passengers were already on board. We couldn't wait any longer. Despite Tabasco's protests, I transferred him to the pocket of my parka with my hand for company and let him expend his newfound energy by exercising his teeth instead of his legs. Fortunately, he stopped chittering as we swung through security.

But what would happen on the plane? He was still excited by his experience at the Reillys. This time he wasn't satisfied to stay sleeping in the tote bag. He climbed out of my pocket, crept behind my back and started to crawl to the seats next to ours. Thank goodness we had a whole row to ourselves. I feigned sleep every time the flight attendant came by. And to keep her away, I even

went without dinner! How far does one go to protect a stowaway raccoon?

I was about to find out. The ominous-looking envelope awaiting us under the door of our last hotel room in Saskatchewan was not the permit that Jack had requested. It was a letter from Alberta's Fish and Wildlife forbidding me to bring Tabasco into the province at all.

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"What shall I do with you, my pet?" I asked the raccoon as we went to bed. "Send you home alone in the baggage compartment to British Columbia on another plane? Let you loose in Saskatchewan?"

Tabasco chattered a reply and snuggled into my pillow. He preferred to take his chances with me.

I was very nervous the next morning as I stepped off the plane in Calgary. Tabasco was on his best behaviour, sleeping quietly in my pocket. No uniformed officer approached so I hailed a taxi and headed for our appointment at the radio station.

The taxi driver had the radio on, tuned to CBC. "Today we have a special visitor on the program: Tabasco, a saucy raccoon," I heard. "Join us in half an hour to welcome Tabasco and his companion."

When we arrived at the station I explained the situation.

The host agreed not to say that Tabasco was in the studio. I told the audience stories about raccoons but I didn't confess that one of them was sleeping by the microphone in front of me.

Our next appointment was at the TV studio, where twenty-five children were sitting in a circle eagerly awaiting Tabasco. They stared in awe as they carefully passed my little raccoon from hand to hand around the ring. The interviewer didn't tell her viewers that Tabasco was in an Alberta studio. When they saw Tabasco he

was lying on a red rug and when they saw me I was wearing my blue skirt. What they didn't know was that whenever the cameraman wanted a shot of me, the interviewer would whisk Tabasco and his red rug away from

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my knees. To the viewers at home, it looked as if I had brought Tabasco on film but not in person. They never saw us together.

The reporter at the newspaper was so impressed with Tabasco that she put his photo on the front page. But she didn't say where the photograph was taken. Nobody knew that it was taken just outside her office. To get to know Tabasco better she took us to lunch. I stashed the raccoon under the table, but she couldn't resist taking him out of the tote bag and holding him when I left to make a phone call. "He snuffles and squeaks till he goes to sleep, just like a fussy baby," she said in surprise when I returned to the table.

By this time Tabasco was drinking three or four ounces of milk four times a day, he weighed four pounds and he was too big even for the tote bag. On the plane back to Vancouver he crawled out and climbed up onto my knees. It was the last flight of the tour and if the flight attendants found out about their extra passenger, it wouldn't really matter. The worst they could do would be to escort Tabasco off the plane. Come to think of it, that wouldn't be too bad an' idea. After two weeks of travelling and collecting more baggage, I could have used some help.

Tabasco fell asleep and I lay back to do what I hadn't time to do on the trip—read my book.

"I wonder what it's like to have a raccoon in one's parka?" asked my fellow passenger, who had noticed the book but not its live subject. "Where do you think she

really keeps it?"

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"On my lap," I grinned.

He looked down. "You're kidding, right?"

"No," I said innocently. "Look again."

Once again, he glanced down. Then he laughed.

"Okay. It's stuffed."

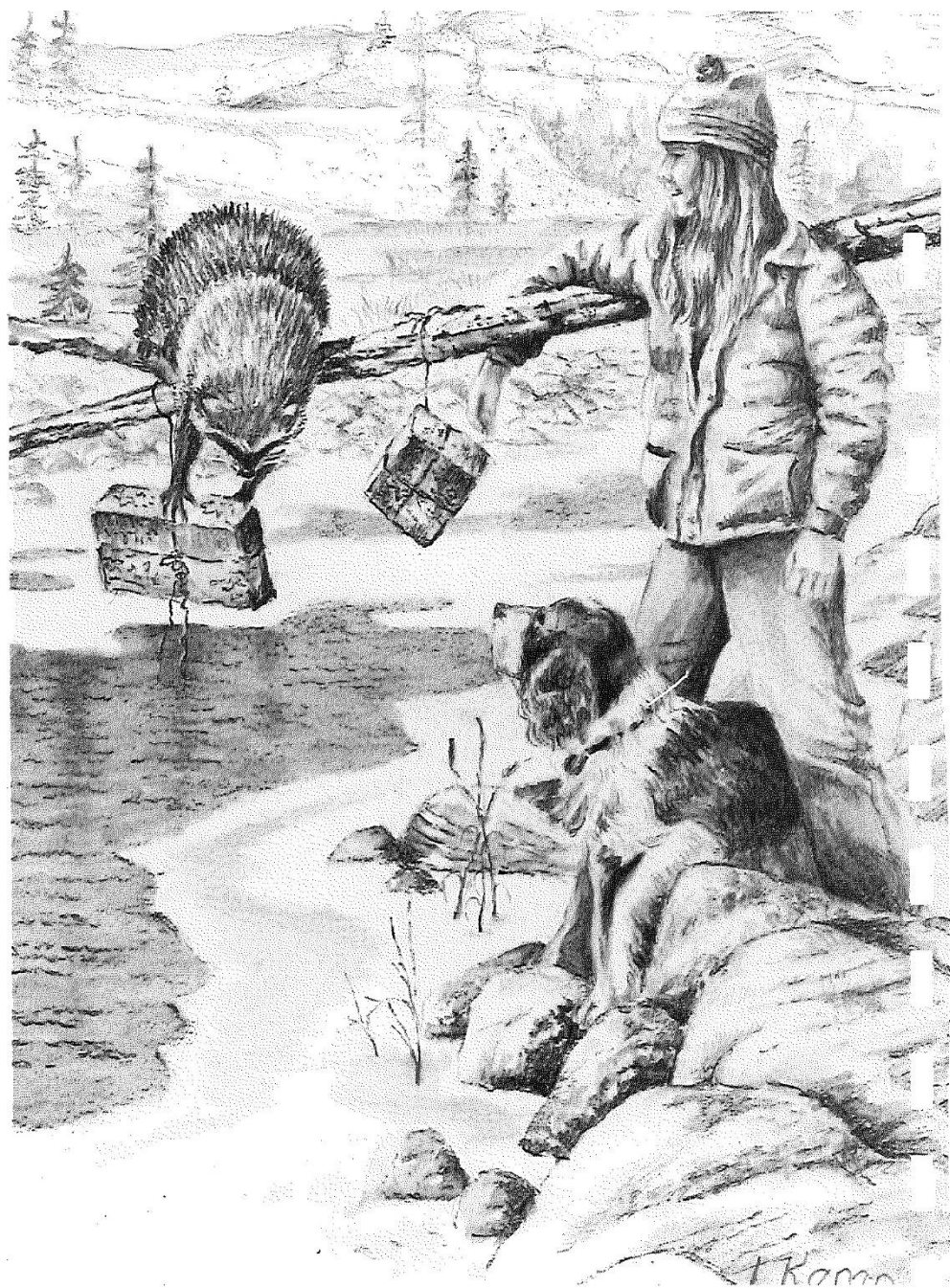
I tickled Tabasco under the chin. His eyes opened and he stretched out lazily.

Tabasco had big, bright, beady eyes and thick, shiny fur. The man stared at him. "My God! I don't believe it!" he said.

In his short life, Tabasco had amazed a lot of people.

He had charmed adults and children alike. He had appealed to their need to touch something wild.

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CHAPTER 7

THERE'S A RACCOON UNDER MY CHRISTMAS TREE

In the wild, raccoons of Tabasco's age would be looking for a cozy den to spend the winter. He already had one in a tree stump in his cage in the Okanagan, but he rarely spent time there of his own accord. He preferred visiting the neighbours.

He liked wandering the orchard and poking into the outbuildings to look for a high, secluded ledge to have a snooze. He had no intention of sleeping there all winter. Following the feet of children as they walked to and from school or playing on patios while their parents watched through the security of their glass doors was far more fun. He regularly visited half a dozen neighbours in a mile-wide circle.

Most of them didn't mind his visits and some of them, especially the closest ones like Todd's parents, were delighted when Tabasco made their sheds into his second homes. Todd continued to take the raccoon for walks along the creek. His father, Gary, carried Tabasco around on his shoulder while he did chores, and his

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mother, Carole, let him come to her coffee parties. The family was very concerned for the raccoon's welfare.

"Tabasco fell off the rafters of the woodshed today.

That's higher than a ceiling," Gary said in wonderment.

"I felt sure he'd get hurt. It knocked the wind out of him but he landed on the snow and picked right up again."

Other neighbours, thinking he was lost, phoned to let me know where he was. "No, he's not a nuisance but he wants in so badly. It seems so cold now for him out in the orchard." Those who fell for Tabasco's pleading eyes on the porch and let him inside confessed afterwards that

“it was a mistake.”

Tabasco wanted to be indoors for the sake of company, not because of the cold. He was in excellent health, over twenty pounds in weight, and he had a shiny warm fur coat. Like wild raccoons in the fall, he had developed a taste for nuts, which helped pad him with fat for the winter season. He had doubled his weight in the Okanagan.

Tabasco loved flying into the living room to the nut jar on the coffee table. At first, he leaned over the table, scooped out two handfuls of nuts from deep in the bowl and, without looking what he was doing, scooted under the chesterfield to devour them in peace. Later, he got brave enough to jump right onto the table. Once when he thought I was going to stop him, he curled his fingers individually around half a dozen nuts of various sizes and stuffed them into his mouth. All were gone in a flash.

At first, he bit into each nut one piece at a time and made a terrible mess sending shells and nutmeats every which way. Then he learned to bite them in two with just

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the right pressure to break the shell cleanly and reveal the whole nut inside. Eventually, he learned how to break an egg the same way, not by pressing it against something hard but by biting into the shell.

There were lots of Tabasco's favourite goodies around at Christmastime. He did his rounds collecting nuts, chocolates, eggs and mandarin oranges. He'd go off during the day on his social calls then at dark I'd stand on the veranda and call him. He made no answering call but suddenly, as if from nowhere, he'd appear at my feet, silent and ghostlike. It was eerie.

On Christmas Eve I stopped work at the typewriter for a two-day holiday. This evening, unusually. Tabasco didn't come to my call. I pulled on my parka and mukluks

and went to look for him. I knew he had to be with people. Trouble was, Christmas Eve was not a good night of the year for a people-loving raccoon to be wandering from party to party.

Gary, Carole and Todd were away and the people looking after their house for the holiday hadn't seen Tabasco. There was a lot of light and noise and laughter from a house on the creek way down at the end of the orchard, but, as I hadn't been to it before or even seen it in summer through the trees, I searched instead in the opposite direction. Tabasco usually wandered down the trail to the road.

"Yes, Tabasco was here earlier," said the couple in the first house. "We were taking pictures of him." The raccoon had left the evidence. Smudge marks on the patio door. Plastic torn off the windows. Stuffing ripped

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from the upended kitchen chairs.

The elderly man in the house next door had chickens and, knowing Tabasco's love for eggs, I didn't really want to check there. But he was very welcoming. "No, he didn't come here tonight, but I'm glad you did, I wanted to meet you. I do hope he doesn't get hurt. There's a lot of crazy drivers out tonight," he said. "Oh, do you want to take some eggs home for Tabasco? They can be his Christmas present from me."

Bertha, who lived in the third house, was away but her dogs, two big Dalmatians, barked madly as I passed. Tabasco had learned to fear dogs in the Okanagan and, with Beau not at his side to protect him, I was sure he'd sidestepped their place.

The fourth house was dark and empty. No fun there. I continued on as I knew Tabasco would.

The people who were looking after the Palmberg house

were having a very lively party but the family Tabasco knew were away. In fact, most of the regular people on his circuit were either gone or had other people staying in their houses.

By the time I had checked a few more houses along Tabasco's usual route and reached the highway, I was beginning to be concerned—and not only for Tabasco. Jack was waiting for his Christmas Eve dinner and I had planned to cook it. I had been tramping through the snow in the dark for almost two hours.

"I expected it," Jack said resignedly when I phoned. "I stayed in old clothes in case you wanted me to join you in the search."

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Wondering whether or not I should phone the local radio and police stations, I trudged back to Jack's place. Moonlight was now shining over the creek and onto our veranda. I looked down at the glistening snow and saw stuffing. Not the stuffing to be put in the Christmas turkey but the kind of stuffing raccoons shred from kitchen chairs.

I was on the right trail, a stuffing trail, and it led through the trees along the creek to the noisy house at the end of the orchard. I stumbled across a garden of snow-crusting winter cabbages and threaded through sheds, garages and other outbuildings to a cozy cedar house with wide patio doors.

This was where the action was on Christmas Eve in Trout Creek. And judging by the laughter, shouting, applause and delighted screams. Tabasco had found it. "Toon, toon, tatoon," I heard some toddler cry as I rang the bell.

"So you own the raccoon," said the nice lady who answered the door. "Come in. I'm Katy Madsen. We're

having a ball with this raccoon.”

I knew Katy by reputation. She was a local naturalist and a well-known animal lover. Sensibly, she had not invited Tabasco into the house and he was doing his entertaining on a table in the glassed-in porch. His audience was entranced. They blew whistles, waved their party hats and clapped while he danced and pranced and whirled and twirled on the other side of the glass. Tabasco was the life of the party and he loved it. No wonder he hadn’t wanted to come home when I called.

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But supper was waiting and there were presents to be opened. I hoisted the hero on my shoulder and he rode off to a final round of applause, clinging to my parka hood with one hand and eating Katy’s chocolates with the other. He was still smiling and making his little “uhuh, uhuh” noises when we got back home.

Next day, we had a Christmas dinner party and gift opening for the animals down at the creek. Our guests were Shelley, Jack’s twelve-year-old daughter who was visiting us for the Christmas holidays. Tabasco and Beauregard.

I hung gaily wrapped boxes of dog food meaties, mandarin oranges, nuts, juicy bones and boxes of Apple Jacks on the bare branches overhanging the creek and Tabasco either stretched up on the ice and pulled them down or else he walked along the limbs and pulled them up. Then he had the fun of tearing into the packages, shredding the paper, and ripping out the contents. This was the raccoon’s first Christmas and he must have wondered why he was allowed to do things that were definite no-no’s in the office.

After dinner we played hockey on the partly frozen creek. Tabasco didn’t need skates or sticks or pucks. He

slipped and skidded over the ice, batting ice balls with his flat hands and feet. He splayed out his toes to get a better grip and waved his tail from side to side for better balance.

He used the same equipment when we went cross country skiing with Shelley on weekends. At first, he wanted to stay in the car and bite Beauregard's ear but

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when we put on our skis and left him, he decided to follow. He plunged into the powder snow and floundered around till he found our tracks.

"He looks like a powder puff," said Shelley with a giggle as we turned around to watch Tabasco, spattered with snowflakes, humping after us with his shoulders hunched, tail waving and nose steadfastly pointed forwards. The tracks were deep—all we could see of him was his tail.

He made faster progress when we reached the snowmobile tracks. He stopped snowplowing and started galloping on the harder surface.

"Look!" called Shelley. "He's heading away to that tree. He's making his own tracks."

The courageous little raccoon was in strange country but he recognized a tree, the only one in this vast expanse of whiteness, and he wanted to climb it. He left the main trail and pushed through virgin snow to a huge ponderosa pine hung with pale green lichen. We rested on our skis and watched while he tried to climb the smooth, icy bark. With all four limbs splayed outward as far as they could go, he snatched jerkily at the tree to propel himself upwards the way a logger does. Unfortunately, not being able to hug the trunk with his arms as he did phone poles or the spindly fruit trees in the orchard, he kept slipping downwards.

“He’s found some woodpecker holes,” Jack told us, looking through his binoculars. “He’s poking his fingers into them to haul himself up that way. Hmmm! Clever little coon.”

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Raccoons have good memories. The ponderosa was a dead tree and Tabasco remembered from past experience that dead limbs could break under his weight. He made no attempt to walk along the side branches. Instead, he sat in a fork of the tree and chewed green lichen.

Jack could appreciate some raccoon abilities but he couldn’t wait till Tabasco had tired of his tree. We had to push on. As the distance increased between us—and with Beauregard barking encouragement—the raccoon turned himself around on the trunk and descended. To slow his descent, he turned his hind feet backwards the way a squirrel does.

But curious raccoons are always being distracted. He suddenly veered off his freshly raccoon-plowed track and floundered through virgin snow again to a low gully.

“Well, I guess we have to ski where the raccoon goes,” said Jack, a bit grimly.

When we got to where we last saw him. Tabasco was skating down the icy sides of the gully. He expected us to play with him. While Jack watched, Shelley and I kneaded snowballs into ice balls and rolled them down the bank like miniature avalanches. Tabasco slithered along the thin trail they made and tried to catch them. “He can catch them okay,” laughed Shelley. “Trouble is, he won’t throw them back so we have to make some more.”

Needless to say, after a day of snowshoeing, skiing and skating. Tabasco always slept in the car on the way home.

Jack didn't mind taking Tabasco with us when we

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went skiing but he certainly refused to take the raccoon with us when we went collaring deer or cougars. One night he had no choice.

We were dining with friends and had taken Tabasco along. The Batkin family was high on his list of fans in the Okanagan. Art and Marg and their two children, Raymond and Donna, loved to babysit the raccoon in their trailer in Summerland.

While we were having dinner. Tabasco hung around on the steps outside. After dessert, the children begged to bring him in. Jack gave me a warning look but Art and Marg were as keen as their children to play with the raccoon.

"Just make sure you keep an eye on him," I advised, "and I mean all the time."

Tabasco needed no second invitation. As soon as the door opened, he scampered up the steps and, uncannily, headed for the bathroom. He ran right into a wooden wall. Standard procedure in partially raccoon-proofing a house while visiting is to close all doors to lessen the mess a raccoon can make. He pushed a case against the door and stood on it to reach the doorknob. He wiggled and shook and pulled it but it was smooth and his velvety hands kept slipping off the surface. Tabasco's last resort was to squeeze his fingers into the crack to pry the door open, but both the doorknob and the door refused to budge.

Well, if you can't get in one place, try another. The oven door had a handle. He cantered over to the stove, reached up to the oven door handle and pulled it downwards. Of

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course, it opened and came down on his nose so he gave

that up. Ah, a cupboard above the stove. Tabasco knew a cupboard when he saw one and those doors opened sideways. "No, let him go, it's all right," Marg laughed when I leapt to head off a catastrophe. "Let's see what he likes." Jack, who is usually concerned with more serious experiments, retreated to the corner with a newspaper. He threw up his hands as if he had seen it all before, which of course he had.

As expected. Tabasco made straight for the box of sugar cubes, filched a few in his mouth and slithered down the slippery kitchen counter to the floor. He lay on his back, all four feet in the air, and delicately rolled a single sugar cube around with all twenty toes. He did the same thing with ice cubes and grapes. Raccoons have marvellous control of small things, even things like ice and sugar cubes that get tinier and tinier the more they are handled.

After the explorations were done. Tabasco turned his constantly roving attention to the people. Art and Raymond immediately got down on the floor at raccoon level and let Tabasco climb all over their heads and pull their hair and finger their ears and noses. Donna, more cautious, donned her raccoon-attack gear of parka, mitts and toque before she joined them.

The play was interrupted by the telephone. The call was for Jack. There was a deer in his deer trap and we had to go and put a radio collar on it. There was no time to go home first so Tabasco had to come too.

"Just keep that raccoon out of the way," Jack warned

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grimly as we headed for Trap Number Three on the hillside overlooking Peachland orchards.

Jack's truck was stuffed with trapping equipment, clothes, tools, canvas bags, radio collars and other gear

for trapping and collaring deer. I couldn't let Tabasco loose in the truck. And I couldn't let him loose on the hill as he would be sure to interfere with the deer.

I found myself, raccoon in hand, shining a spotlight on a wildly thrashing doe with madly staring eyes while Jack worked to get it collared. I was sent scurrying back and forth between the trap and the truck to ferry his supplies.

"Get that goldarned raccoon away from me," yelled Jack as he struggled to keep the deer on the ground, avoid its violently flailing legs and circle its neck with the radio collar. "Find me short rivets, they're somewhere in the truck."

Alternately holding on to Tabasco's tail to keep him inside the truck and stuffing his head behind the seat to keep him away from the equipment, I scrabbled through jackets, boots, gloves, clipboards, plastic bags. Jack's pipe and tobacco and the rest of the jumble looking for short rivets. "I wish you knew what a rivet was. Tabasco, you'd find it like a shot," I said to the raccoon.

I think Tabasco thought this mess was made for him in some Raccoon Heaven or The Great Wastepaper Basket in the Sky. While Jack rode the deer around the trap, I rode Tabasco around the inside of the truck, lunging over the junk to keep hold of him. At one point, he broke away from my grasp and started crunching

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something under the seat. Rivets? Matches? Tranquilizers? No—cactus that had stuck to a pair of our boots.

Tabasco was crunching cactus between his teeth with the same enthusiasm he showed for crunching Apple Jacks.

Finally, I found a bag of rivets but they were long.

"That's okay, I found the short ones in my pocket," said Jack as he finished fitting the collar around the doe's

neck. "Now keep that raccoon clear while I let this doe go. She'll run uphill."

Still holding Tabasco, I took a position on the downside of the hill with my back to the road, the traffic, the orchards and the lake. I wanted to get a clear view of the deer as it escaped uphill in the moonlight.

But animals, like people, are unpredictable. "Watch out, Lyn, it's going downhill," yelled Jack.

Tabasco and I were nearly bowled over by the doe as it careered madly down the cactus-splashed slope, tore through a hole in the fence and leapt gracefully across the road to a lakeside orchard. From then on, its beeping radio collar would tell where it went.

Tabasco must have been miffed next day when we left him home and went off to radio collar a cougar in Shuttleworth Canyon. The back door had not been slammed tightly enough and we got back from our cougar hunt to find the farmhouse in chaos. The toilet bowl was plugged with toilet rolls, shampoo bottles, soap containers and toothpaste tubes. Blankets stripped from the beds and clothes pulled off hangers in the wardrobes filled the bathtub. The contents of kitchen cupboards were dragged upstairs and stuffed under the beds. A trail of Japanese

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noodles and broken necklaces linked the upstairs with the downstairs and made loops between the kitchen and the chesterfield in the living room.

"You know, I think Tabasco kept thinking someone was coming brandishing a big no-no stick so he kept hiding under the chesterfield. Then when he heard the truck drive up to the house, he raced outside rather than be caught inside. What do you think?" I asked Jack, innocently. But Jack couldn't say anything. He was all choked up.

Tabasco continued his schooling and we continued ours. One day, he covered all grades from kindergarten to university. Shelley, who was in grade six at Uplands Elementary in Penticton, took him to school and gave a little lecture on raccoons to each class as part of her wildlife appreciation project. I gave her a big lecture on how to stay out of trouble. She survived her day with Tabasco to tell me the highlights.

"In kindergarten the kids sat in a circle while Tabasco wandered around as if he owned the place. They were all smiles and giggles even when Tabasco crawled all over them. He nipped their ears, stole their nuts and threw their playthings out of the sandbox.

"I had to guard the teacher's desk in grade one because he opened her purse and upended her makeup bag.

"I put him in the sink in grade two so the kids could see how he turns taps on and catches the drips with his

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hands. Then I had to follow him around the room wiping up his wet paw prints.

"In grade three he tried nosing into the gerbil's cage and batting the gerbil but I didn't think I should put them together. He batted the cans and boxes around their play store instead.

"He batted a big ball around grade four.

"The grade fives were the best. They thought it was neat when Tabasco stood on the mice cage and it crushed under his weight. There were mice running everywhere and Tabasco was running everywhere trying to catch them. The class thought it was great."

"And the teacher?" I asked weakly.

"No sweat," replied Shelley cheerfully. "It took her some time but she caught all the mice. Tabasco got into a lot of trouble in grade six though. He was getting pretty

rambunctious by this time with all the attention. He swiped everybody's bubblegum and I had a hard time getting it all back. He chewed a felt pen and got pink all over his tongue so I put him in a cage till lunchtime. I know you don't like him eating junk food but he really likes hot dogs and chips."

That night Jack and I took him to our wildlife course in Kelowna and learned a few things ourselves. The professor pried and poked and prodded then pronounced Tabasco to be a she, not a he. I had never questioned Tabasco's sex although I knew with raccoons it was difficult to tell. The zoo had said he was a he. The biologists at the Fish and Wildlife Branch had said he was a he. Jack had said he was a he.

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"I wonder if I should change Tabasco's name to Tabasca," I said to Jack on the way back to Summerland. "Think you could also change some of its ways?" Jack replied sweetly.

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