



THE RACCOONS OF CENTRAL PARK

BY

■ DOVE BRADSHAW ■



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Chapter 1

The mailman from the East 92nd Street post office, a mail pouch hoisted on his back, headed for Central Park to deliver a letter addressed to:

**MR. AND MRS. HAROLD RAKOO AND THE TRIPLETS
THE WISTERIA ARBOR THE FRONT POST FROM THE LEFT
THE ITALIAN GARDEN
CENTRAL PARK, NY 10128**

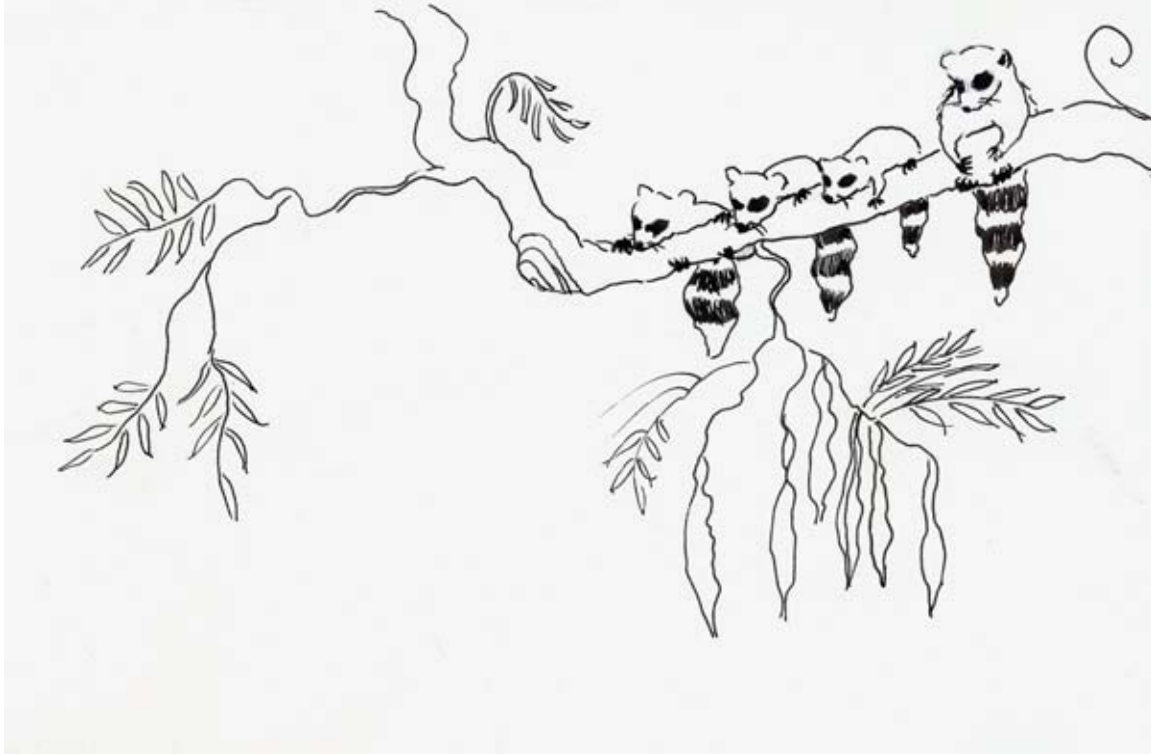
The envelope was made of a dried lily pad folded on four sides in the shape of a rectangle and carefully tied with chives. The address had been discretely gnawed in the reverse of brail and there was even a return address:

**ROSIE AND NICOLAS RAKOO AND THE QUINTUPLETS
NORTH PUMP HOUSE
THE RESERVOIR
CENTRAL PARK, NY 10021**

The mailman cause a small stir amongst the passersby when he climbed the steps of the Wisteria Arbor and paused at the Fifth Front Post from the left deliberately whistling a particular tune. What, they wondered, did that mean as he looked up so intently? Soon they saw a rather sleepy raccoon come trundling down the pole a trifle clumsily for all her experience of trellis climbing, shifting her furry body heavily from side to side. After all for her it was the middle of the night. It turned out that that was Mrs. Philippa Rakoo.

When she was just about arm's reach the mailman extended his hand with the envelope and she extended her small black one to take it. The observers were even more astonished but being from New York they took it in stride.

Mrs. Philippa Rakoo chirped a thank you and then lightly held the envelope between her teeth so as not to pierce it. She began to climb even more laboriously back up to her family, who were by then all awake and all four of them peering down to witness this rare event.



When Philippa arrived near their door the triplets were half out of their minds bounding up and down with uncontainable glee and Harold too was clearly just as excited though he wasn't leaping about. "Well, hurry up who is it from?" Come on!!!" he snorted. Philippa had the honor of tearing off the knotted chives and opening the envelope. Inside, the letter was also carefully chewed, this time into a large oak leaf. Philippa announced that it was from their Aunt Rosie and Uncle Nick.

HALF MOON

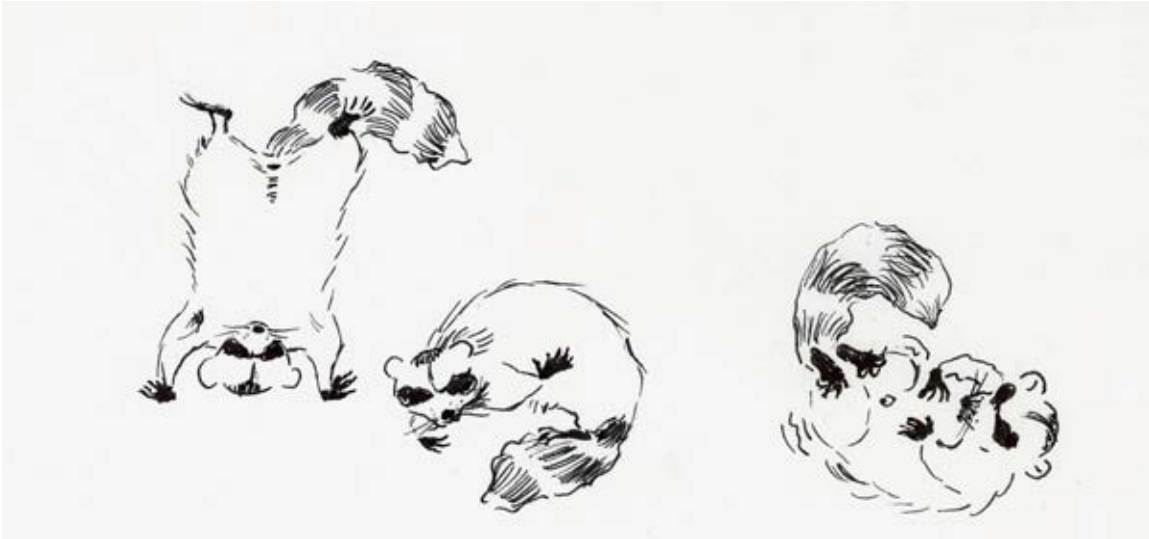
DEAR ALL,

WE MISS YOU SO AND HOPE THAT ON THE FULL MOON YOU *WILL* COME TO STAY FOR A FEW DAYS AT THE PUMP HOUSE. THE SWIMMING IS GREAT AND THE GULLS WILL BE HAPPY TO GIVE THE TRIPLETS RIDES. YOU KNOW THERE'S THE NEW CAST IRON FENCE TOO THAT'S SO MUCH NICER THAN THE OLD CYCLONE ONE. WE CAN SEE THE WOODS AND GRASSY KNOLLS AND EVEN THE OLD MATCHING CAST IRON BRIDGE MUCH MORE CLEARLY NOW. WE'RE STILL JUST AS PROTECTED AS EVER WITH A MUCH MORE ELEGANT ADDRESS. WE WANT YOU TO COME SEE!

LOTS OF LOVE,

YOUR COUSINS THE QUINTUPLETS AND AUNT ROSIE AND UNCLE NICK

The Triplets, Evelina, Jean and Tim rolled around in ecstasy, practically falling off the Arbor, chirping that they could hardly wait for evening to set off.



But father Harold had to tell them that there were still two weeks until the full moon. They shrieked with disappointment, furious that time stood in their way. Their parents thought they'd have to supply some other more moderate excitement until The Great Day. They told the children that they'd take them to the Meer that night and ask the painted turtles to give them rides to the island where they could check on the progress of the hatching of the Swans' eggs. That did the trick and they all went back to sleep.

Chapter 2

Come evening only by the dim light of the half moon the Rakoos found their way to the Meer. In order not to complicate their travel they always made their plans for excursions at night when no humans were about. Besides, that's when raccoons are awake. They are nocturnal. That means that at night they can see just as well as in the daylight though they don't see in color the way we do. They sure can smell much better than we can though! "Oh," Jean said, "We can pick up quinces in the French garden on our way home – look they're ripe!" You see Raccoons

can smell ripening fruit a block away. "Wow, they're huge golden quinces – the fattest are already on the ground!" cried Tim. The Rakoos always ate raw food foraged fresh from the woods and gardens. They never picked through the refuse of pizzas and donuts left by those destructive humans. The most unsavory scraps were dumped in the giant trash baskets lined with black plastic. Lowly beings might nibble those horrors, but left to their own devices raccoons ate pure raw food. Early there were Hawthorn berries and Cardoon cherries, the fruit from Dogwoods. They ate rose hips and pussy willows and raided a few tulip bulbs. In the fall the gardeners planted thousands so a small family wouldn't disturb their elaborate design in the slightest. In summer they ate the crab apples from the lanes dividing the Italian from the French and English Gardens to the North and South. Later in the fall, of course, they ate quinces from the French Garden and the very plentiful and stinky Ginkgo fruit. In winter helping to keep the grounds clear they ate bark from small trees and naturally there was an endless supply of acorns which they had stored up in the previous months. Even the Triplets were good at foraging.

That night armed with their flattened knapsacks they arrived at the Meer and sure enough with a snort Father Harold called up the painted turtle, William. Harold knew just where to look for him at the South end of the Meer where William often stayed down deep in the mud. Even under water William heard Harold's familiar snort. He swam up, shedding clouds of black mud at each breast stroke until he surfaced, shining clean. Father Harold explained that he had promised the Triplets a ride to the island to see the Swan's eggs and wondered whether William would call up his family to oblige him. William said, "Come to think of it I'm curious about the eggs too." Immediately he called his two sons Larry and Bill. The Triplets mounted their wet backs which were glistening in moonlight. The turtles rested both their back legs at the sloping edge of the shore to help steady their riders as they mounted. The young raccoons dangled their legs up to their knees in the water because they absolutely love water. Just then Papa Swan paddled over as though he was expecting their party. When he learned that the children were headed to the island to see Mama Swan he offered that, indeed the eggs still hadn't hatched, at least that was the case ten minutes ago. He explained, "I only just left to find food." He invited Father Harold and Mother Philippa to ride on his back saying that he could hunt later.

Harold and Philippa were more than happy to accept because they had planned to trundle along the much longer path surrounding the Meer. The path was just as the water's edge, but since it was so winding it would have taken them more than twice as long. The turtles, of course, could

take the direct route. *They* are excellent swimmers getting their reputation for slowness only when they venture on dry land.



Chapter 3

At the North side of the island Mama Swan had made a huge nest – just about the largest that anyone makes in the park except for the egrets perhaps. Branches, not twigs make up the warp and woof of their nest. When the Raccoon party arrived, coming first were the Triplets, followed slowly by the turtles. Bringing up the rear were Mother and Father Rakoo and Papa Swan. Mama Swan bowed her long neck in honor of their surprise visit and rose, legs stiff from many hours of sitting. Wobblingly she stepped out of the nest to show off her eggs. Of course, she was ready to let Papa Swan take over. In the bird kingdom Swans share hatching like penguins, their distant eighth cousins twice removed.

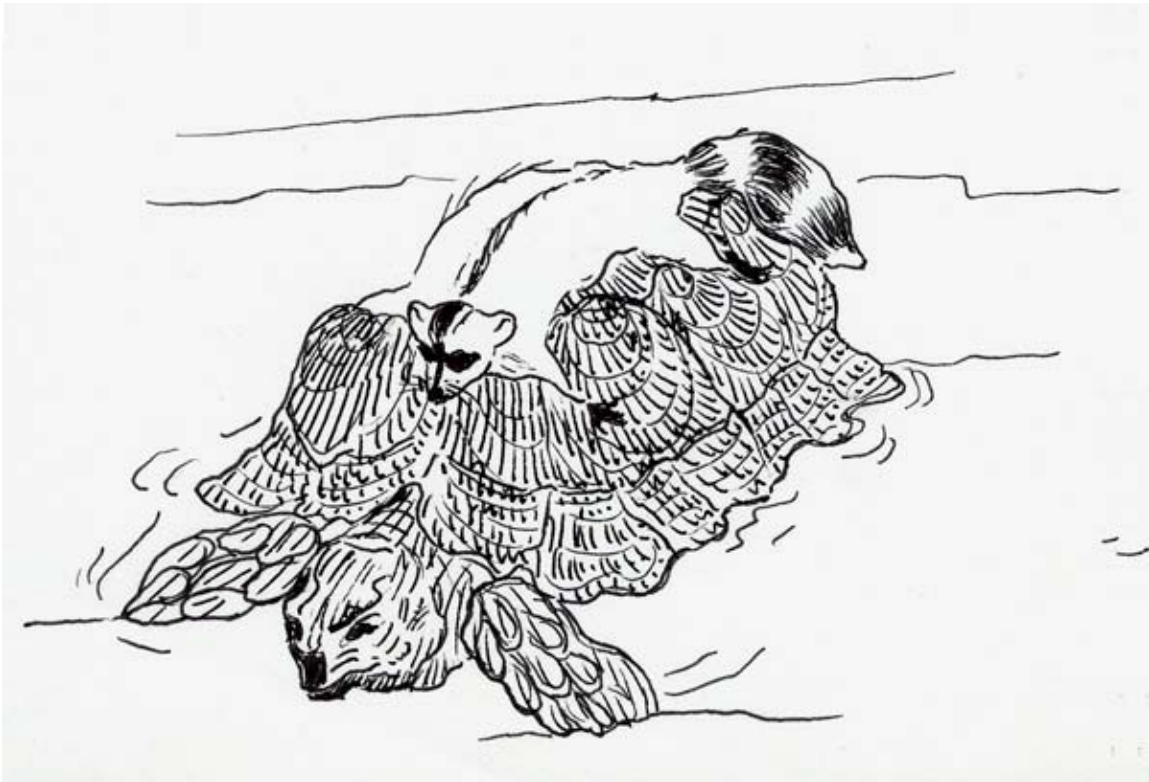
Mama Swan was exceedingly proud of her two perfectly formed plump eggs, white as her snowy down feathers and glowing even in moonlight

with the inner warmth of potential life. The Triplets asked whether they could reach out and touch the glorious eggs. Mama Swan asked to feel their hands first. As she suspected they were ice cold. Indeed they were so very, *very* cold because for amusement, the Triplets had been trailing them in the Meer as they rode on the turtle's backs. She said that if they rubbed their hands together very fast to warm their fingers they could touch her eggs. Immediately there was such a burning of flesh a fire could almost have started. When the triplets were at fever pitch they put their small black hands on the eggs rapidly patting them all over. Whenever there was the slightest danger of their hands cooling the Triplets vigorously rubbed them again and went at it afresh. They were so reverent and totally enchanted by the smooth whiteness of the eggs and the contrast with their small fleshy blackness that as children do, they could have kept it up for hours. But Papa Swan was worried that as ambitious as they were there were still some un-caressed spots and that the pattings of even the most enthusiastic army of raccoon kids could not replace the total all-encompassing eiderdown of a swan.



“That’s enough!” He said, to the great disappointment of the kids who, greedy little devils that they were, could never be satisfied. Only the littlest children love to repeat everything ad infinitum. These little ones were far too small to understand what was too much or what was *just* enough. However, to distract them Mother Philippa reminded them that they would return to the French Garden to get quinces.

That consoled the Triplets and they bid Papa Swan goodbye and mounted William, Larry and Bill respectively, while Philippa and Harold got on to Mama Swan this time. They all pushed off to take the water route back to the French Garden. Having spent most of the night on the island, the Triplets fell asleep one after the other on the turtle’s backs. If you’ve ever tried to sleep on a turtle’s back it’s easy as pie. Their shells are very much like the point of a pitched roof which, if you straddle it evenly, you’ll be fine.



The children only awoke when a different movement disturbed their dreams of white eiderdown and black Squirrels kicking up feathers like snow. The Turtles finally lurched up the wide stone steps at the Southern End of the Meer and deposited the little ones gently to the ground. Their parents quietly thanked William and his sons and then lay down so that their youngsters, though barely awake, could circle their necks. Mother Philippa took Tim and Father Harold, Jean and Evelina. The two squeezed through the wrought iron fence with their young on their backs, crossed the French Garden and made their way slowly across Crab Apple Lane and along Wisteria Arbor to the 5th Post Left. Finally they clamored up the trellis to their home 3 stories up. Their young slipped off their shoulders, dropping into bed without having to brush their teeth. Normally, they brushed their teeth with bark-covered sticks. The parents left them while they stole back to the French Garden to gather quinces. They could leave their young alone not only because they were dead to the world but also because raccoon babies don't need sitters. They know enough to stay at home, because *sometimes* it's a matter of life and death.

Chapter 4

The next morning the children were so delighted with the evening's excursion they forgot all about visiting their Pump House relatives. Mother and Father Rakoo didn't say a word. They thought it best not to remind the children until the day before. That would be time enough to prepare for the much greater trip to the Reservoir. *And* they knew it was most important to get a good day's sleep beforehand.

Meanwhile the nights passed quietly in their usual practice of hunting for food, washing it in the large fountain in the Italian Garden and storing a portion up for winter. To shore up their house against the oncoming winter they fixed the loose holes that had developed over the year with branches. Since it was difficult for them to get out to Saks, Bendels and Barneys they got their winter hats and scarves through mail order. Through the more elegant catalogues they even got cashmere. Their self

produced winter coats which were more than adequate for the rest were soon to come all on their own.

For money they used the abandoned coins and trinkets they found regularly. Born scavengers the Rakoos picked up the odd bracelet or ring or once even a necklace with a shiny faceted stone. Amulets indeed – not exactly stolen from those careless humans who were always losing them! Of course they found endless coins and keys – so many their house was fairly bursting – but they couldn't resist a single one. They also got the odd chess piece – a few pawns and even a knight. The prize, though, was an azurite mounted in platinum on a fine linked chain. Mother Philippa thought of the fisherman with their shinny lures tricking carp out of the water and how the human females were tricking their males with their shiners. The bigger the catch the fancier the lure! Of course, Father Harold saw that those silly men fell for a bit less fabric covering the hairless bare flesh of their females (yuuuugh!) and the silly thing was that the bigger the breast the harder those guys fell. But the last laugh wasn't just at men, Father Harold pointed out to Philippa. The females were equally hilarious – they fell for a tiny patch of fur on a man's collar. All those fellows had to do was snap a spot of sheep fur onto their bomber jackets and woof – the female was a goner. No more developed than cave women, their most primitive urges seemed to be satisfied *soooo* superficially. “No Raccoon would have been as easily caught.” both Mother Philippa and Father Harold shook their heads. “No, a young courting male would look for a good forager.” He said and *she* said, “A young female would look for a solid citizen who knew how to mail order!”

One day the Rakoos spotted some newcomers fishing at the Meer, a couple of matronly Bangladeshi women. They seemed an unlikely pair, dressed in saris to the ground one yellow, the other red printed with a miniature pattern, one wearing a bright turquoise sweater, the other a green one, and both with orange and pink scarves respectively. Such bright merry colors! No art world mavens they – with dreary black uniforms head to foot like Italian widows! The Rakoos watched the two ladies catch fish and throw them back. They came each evening and oddly seemed to have the time for such a frivolous pastime. Where were their children? The Rakoos shrugged and carried on with gathering their twigs and provisions.

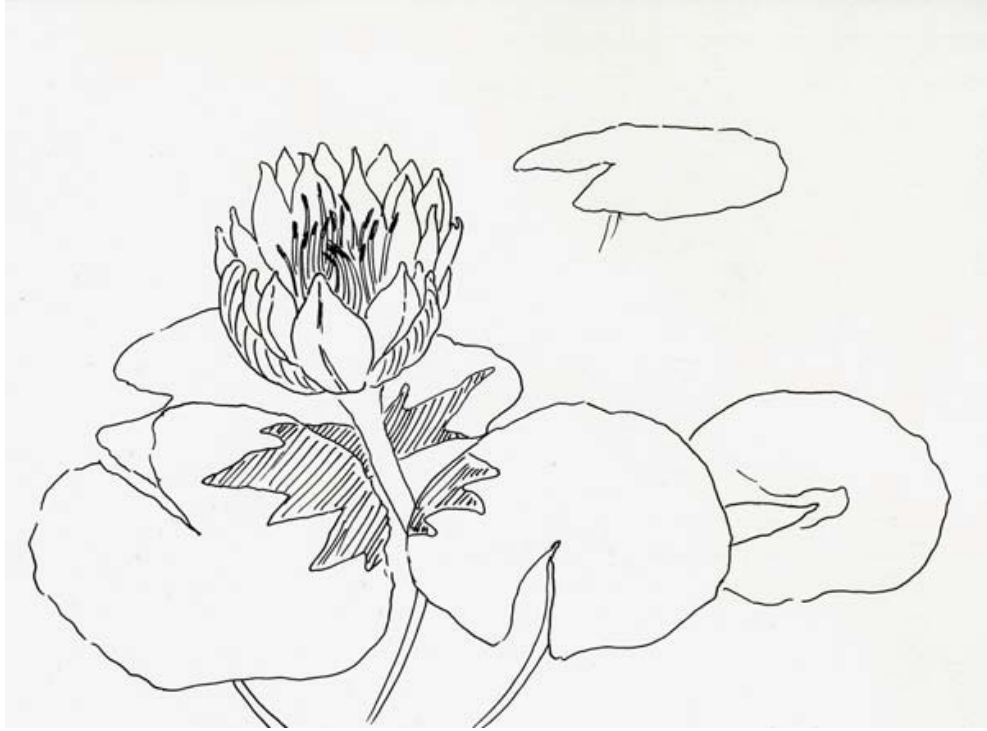
Chapter 5

Finally the penultimate day rolled around and the little family was just finishing a predawn dinner – remember Raccoons sleep by day. Dinner consisted of sliced quince, acorn puree spiced with finely chopped chives, garnished with a side of fronds of magnolia buds crowned with a crab apple rose hip tart for desert. It was served by candle light at their polished wooden table. They had devised a system where they could have a candle if it was carefully aligned with a hole in the leafy Wisteria canopy. Nothing could catch fire and the smoke would escape. They had to be very careful, though, of their straw and twig bedding. At dinner Father Harold announced that they should go to bed early – even before sunrise because that night the moon would be full and they had the great journey to the Pump House ahead of them.

This was the exact wrong thing to say. Of course, the very mention of the Pump House caused the most extraordinary explosion. Think of Aunt Rosie and Uncle Nick and the Quintuplets! For the next hour it was impossible to settle anyone down. Jean, Evelina and Tim roared about bouncing around on their beds, ricocheting off the wall and ceiling.

They were absolutely destroying their beds. What wasn't completely pulverized was shredded into ever tinier twigs and fine straw that fell down between the cracks of the floorboards. The debris drifted some three stories all the way down to the Arbor walkway below. After another hour of putting the beds back together with much less straw and many fewer twigs mind you, the children grumpily made due with their far less comfortable beds. No one at that hour wanted to hunt for the fallen bits blown hither and thither, who knows where. And naturally everyone was too tired to get fresh bedding from their far away gathering spots.

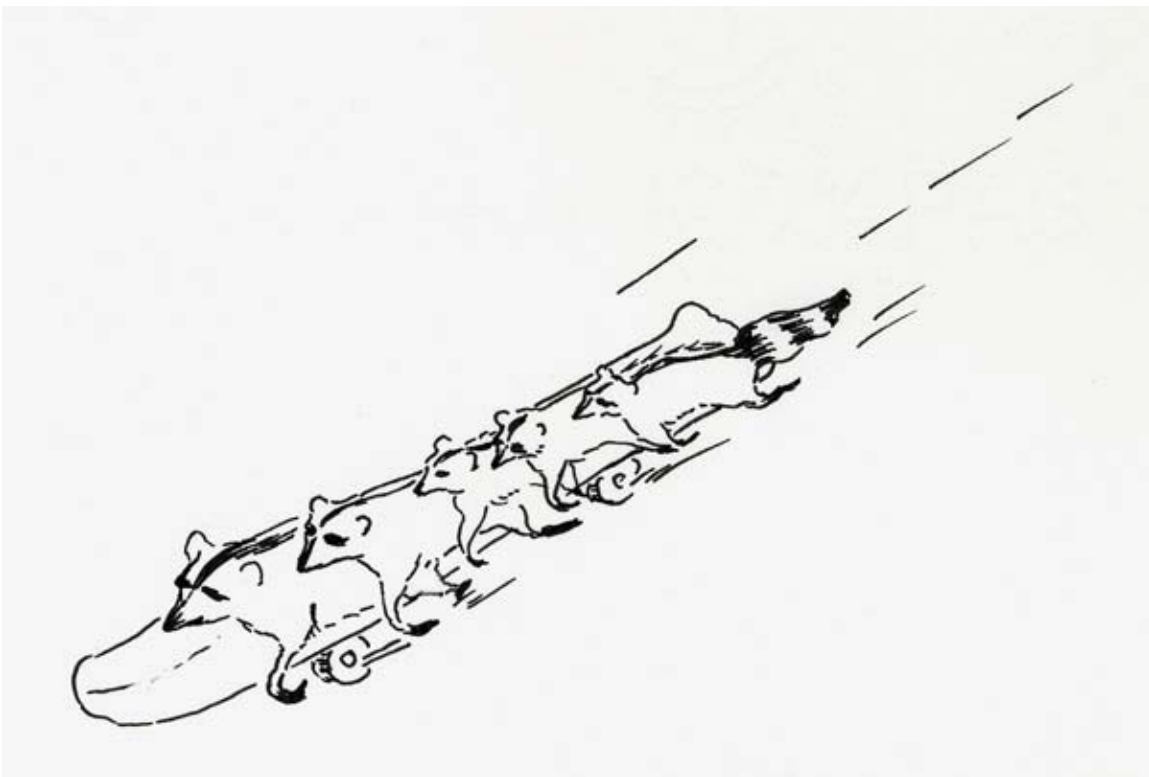




That night the little family awoke not quite as refreshed as usual but their spirits were not the least dampened though one of the children was a bit slow witted, another a tad grumpy and the third a little more quarrelsome. With great patience the clumsy parents, having realized that they had mishandled the situation, were forced to work extra hard to prepare for their journey. Earlier they had packed garden delights to bring from their neck of the woods to the Pump House clan. They tied up their knapsacks bursting with all the provisions already mentioned plus some newly sprouted oyster mushrooms, late dandelion, Ginkgo seeds and pine nuts. The moon rose at 9 PM and finally they all set off each with a large pack strapped to his back.

Chapter 6

The Rakoos traveled south first to the English Garden. There they paused for Mother Philippa to take one purple water lily from the small pond in its center. An elegant bronze fountain with a young maid holding a bird bath on her shoulder and a boy crouching at her feet graced its top end. She packed the lily in its furred pad and then doused it with extra water to keep it fresh. Then she carefully adjusted it so that it stuck out far enough from her knapsack not to get crushed. After that the little group made their way to the outer ring of the garden and slipped through the encircling cast iron fence to climb the hill beyond. When they'd finally reached its summit they found an abandoned skateboard. Father Harold, spotting a tarred road twisting down the other side of the hill, organized the party to get aboard. With all their twenty hands and feet, he commanded them to push off – altogether *all at once*. Down they went at top speed with a roar of metal wheels burning tar beneath them, followed by wild screams.



Weeeeeee!!!

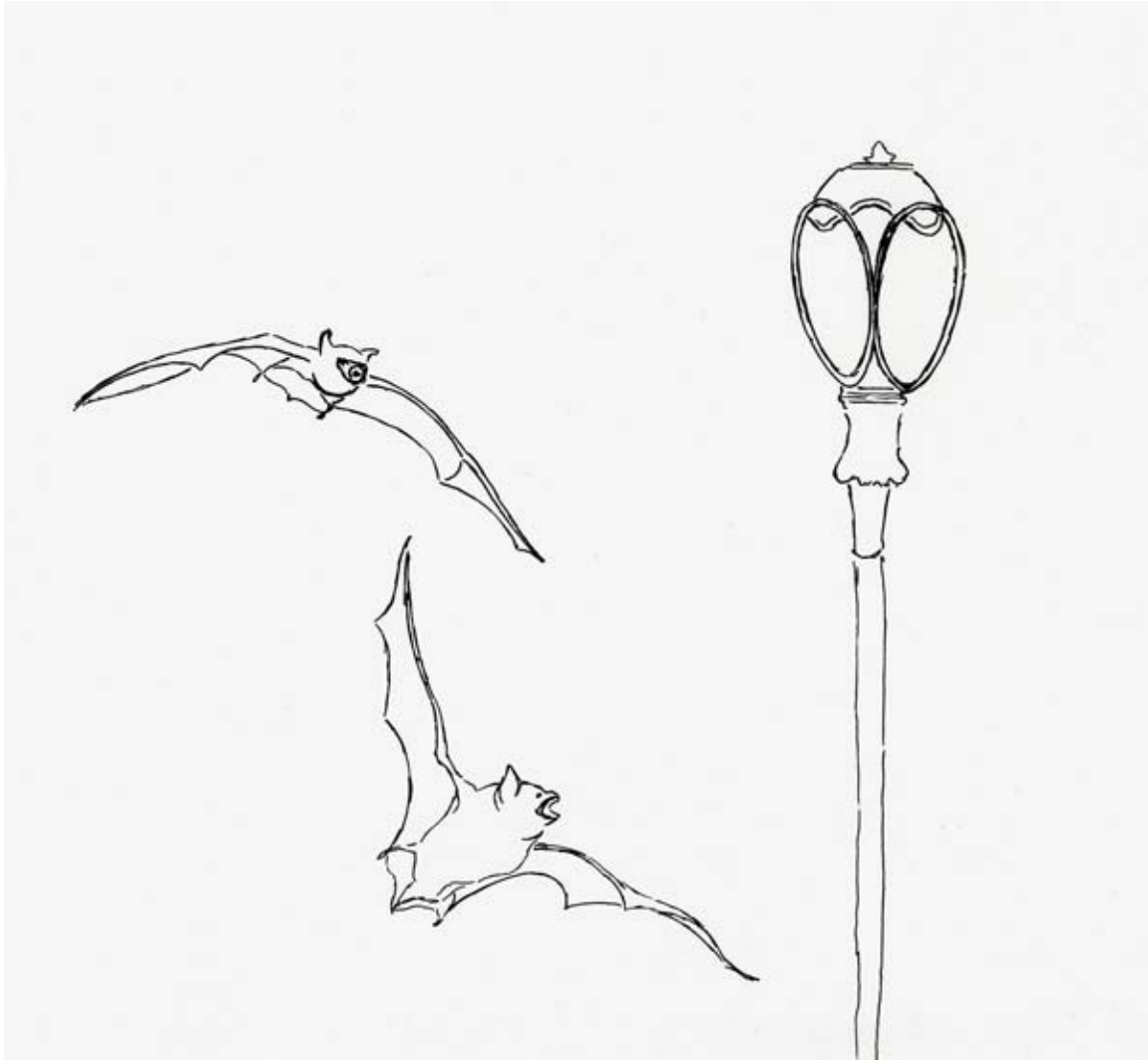
At the bottom of the hill everyone climbed off abandoning the board because they didn't have the strength to push it up the next hill. *That* they lumbered up on foot proceeding very slowly. Sometimes the parents took the little ones on their backs for a spell in addition to their own knapsacks and the kids' as well. Every once in a while they all rested. But they got up after just a short while because there was a still a long way to go.

Then at one point just as they were curled up together they were charged by a wild dog – an Irish wolf hound. No matter how tired a little family can be it is amazing what a galvanizing force a wild dog offers and how it can propel an entire family to fly along the ground in a single, efficient streak. Father Rakoo spotted the wrought iron lattice of the great cast iron bridge that was the approach to the Reservoir. Without a word he led the pack streaking towards it. Each of the Rakoos clamored up the supports under the bridge and as fast as lightning tucked themselves into its intricate bracing. The Wolf Hound from the top of the bridge slobbered down on them, sniffing wildly.



It continued to pace back and forth, its claws making an unpleasant scratching sound on the bridge's wooden surface. The scratching continued. Back and forth it paced relentlessly and the sound grated on their ears at every turn. Dogs have clumsy paws whereas raccoons have skillful little hands that can do just about anything anyone can. Eventually with great frustration, and with its ineffectual batting of paws or lowering of jaws and snapping of teeth below the floorboards, a feeling of helplessness gradually crept over it. Since the dog couldn't climb, its only approach was from the top where it feverishly and quite uselessly menaced the raccoons. Of course, it presented no real danger.

The Rakoos grinned back but plugged their ears so as not to be overly disturbed by the deep growling, but every second witnessing the dog's mounting rage. As time went on the growling went down to ever lower registers. The Rakoos thought they might just have to spend the rest of the night uncomfortably gripping the cold iron filigree under the bridge. Even though it was elegantly designed as one of the grandest cast iron bridges of the nineteenth century, it just wasn't accommodating as a raccoon boudoir. After one of the most painful hours the little family ever spent, the dog gave up and skulked away in shame.



The Rakoos waited another hour or so just to be sure that it was really gone. While they waited they watched some bats circle a nearby lamp. It was one of those handsome lamps also designed in the nineteenth century which was set on the slender stem of a cast iron lamppost. The agitated swoops of the bats looked like the jerky movement of speeded up film. It turned out that the bats were distant cousins of Flippy and Flappy from Somerset, England and how they came all the way from *there* is another story. After a long while, Poppa Harold asked the blind bats, who mysteriously sensed presences with radar, whether the coast was clear. The bats said that it was. Slowly the Rakoo family ventured out, un-crooking their stiff limbs and made their way around to the top deck of the bridge. Two of the Triplets' knapsacks had been lost in the harum-scarum, but the other three were still with them. Even the water lily had miraculously survived unscathed. The wooden boards of the gently

arched bridge made a grand highway to the earthen path surrounding the Reservoir. The bridge didn't span water but rather a wide horse trail set in a great gully below. The Rakoos turned left after crossing the bridge. The Pump House lay to the east.

The first glimmer of light was coming up as they looked across the water and stumbled along tired and shaken, depressed that morning was about to arrive. After a little while they came upon the Great stone Pump House at the Reservoir's northern most end and they slipped through the trumpeted wrought iron fence to their relatives' house. There was no welcoming party however. No doubt they guessed that Nick Rakoo and his family must have all gone to sleep long before sunup. It had taken the other party much longer than expected.

Chapter 7

Father Harold went alone along the last stretch so as not to scare his brother and family. He quietly came to their door and gently scratched. Rosie, who slept lightly awaiting her relatives, bounded up to open it. She had been expecting all the while just such an approach. Harold told her briefly of the encounter with the Irish Wolf Hound and said the others were all fine but dead tired. Rosie followed him back up the hill where everyone was huddled asleep. She helped carry one of the droopy little ones in her teeth careful not to puncture flesh. Philippa and Harold each took one of the remaining sleepers the rest of the way. Rosie tucked the Triplets into a tidy bed she'd prepared for them and invited the parents to her guest room. There a great wide bed of fresh straw and the rich smell of slightly fermented oak leaves awaited them. There was even a couple of plump hemp pillows stuffed with dried lavender. "It's calming and inspires lovely dreams," Rosie said, "*and* they're good for a stiff neck!"

"Ggggreat!" they cried in their gravely raccoon voices, "We could use some of both just now after such a fright and such cramped quarters!" The Triplets, already gone from this world temporarily, needed no such pillows. The next evening everyone was awoken by the Quintuplets. Of course since they had had a full day's sleep, they were up at dusk and careened about like a stampede of wild horses. Mother Rosie warded them off making them play outdoors far away from the house. Even still she had to shush them numerous times when they drew near. It was impossible they found to play by themselves with their cousins so nearby in the house. Hours went by since they had awoken and still no one else was up except Mother Rosie. By seven PM they couldn't contain

themselves any longer and stormed inside. By then they felt that the Triplets and their Aunt Philippa and Uncle Harold were fair game. No one could remain asleep for long under their assault. They crowded into the Triplet's bed and swarmed into their Aunt and Uncle's. The musky smell of hot sleeping flesh was at once strange and enticing since they had been outdoors all evening in the crisp air. They bounded into their beds and chirped and called out their names – Merrill, Alexander, Lisa, Jona, and Marc and when they managed to awaken their cousins, Evelina, Jean and Tim, the uproar was so great that their Uncle awoke too. There was such a hullabaloo and carrying on and exchange of news with everyone talking at once there was hardly a listener insight. The knapsacks were torn open and the bounty presented. Nick and Rosie were overjoyed at such a great variety which they never see. They just have leaves and bark, of course acorns, chives and occasional mushrooms after a wet spell – perhaps the ever present Ginkgos, but not much else. The purple lily was presented with full fanfare.

Luckily the knapsack with most of the stinky Ginkgos was one of the ones that had been lost, but sadly too was the pack with quinces. Jean and Tim were very sorry about this but no one blamed them considering the size – if you've ever seen one – of an Irish Wolf Hound. It could easily have lived at the time of the dinosaurs, huge and appearing prehistoric as it does. The Nick Rakoos had seen Wolf Hounds before. They see almost every breed along the Reservoir since its outer perimeter is one of the great dog promenades. However the Reservoir Rakoos see them safely from *behind* their celebrated wrought iron fence. "And a handsome fence it is indeed," Harold and Philippa were sure to exclaim. "After all," they added, "we risked our lives to see it!"

Chapter 8

The Triplets laughed and rolled around and exclaimed at all the quintuplets' toys. They had as many toys as the Garden Rakoos had varieties of food. There were little sail boats made from the great curls of bark shed from Plane trees. Their sails were trimmed with bark fragments and rigged with chives on Popsicle stick masts. Miniature helicopters were propelled by acorn seeds, hoops were made from twisted willow wands and there were always many, many stray tennis balls. Everyone lovingly teased Uncle Nick, a constant source of fun because he had such an

inactive imagination. He just meandered along in a slower dimension, the gentle butt of every joke.

Directly after a lavish breakfast from the Conservancy Gardens the children were eager to go outside to swim by the rising moon. Raccoons can swim right after eating. The water was cool but the weather was extraordinary – it had warmed to a truly balmy Indian summer evening! There was a slight breeze which rippled the surface of the Reservoir, punctuated occasionally by sudden directional sheets of wind. Such sparkling clear water! Even the Rakoos knew that this is one of the best Reservoirs for a major city in the whole country – maybe even the whole world. They had heard on the radio that the water was piped from a town up the Hudson called Woodstock. And of course they could drink the very water they were swimming in! As they danced and cavorted, the gulls gathered to sleep for the night along a narrow stone bar that divided the Reservoir. When the water was low the bar became visible. To dry off in between dips the Rakoo cousins played Blind Man's Bluff. To cover their eyes, they took turns wearing a black scarf undoubtedly lost by one of those art world faithfuls. However when a Raccoon closes his eyes, he already looks masked. Such a funny sight seeing a “blind” raccoon staggering about trying to tag the nimble sighted ones! Blindfolded they're almost as good as those who are really blind. With their main sense gone, they too can concentrate better on sound and smell.



The gulls before tucking their heads under their wings for the night gave all the little Rakoos rides. Gulls are on the opposite schedule as Raccoons. The little ones climbed on their great snowy backs. Their powerful wings could propel them like huge steel airplanes. The gulls sailed and swooped and made their little charges scream with fear and delight. They skimmed the water making amphibian landings placing their webbed feet in front to break the waves. They swam round and round in large circles while the coons trailed their feet in the water lazily watching the ripples they cut. Evenings went by in this happy fashion and no one could get enough of it.



Occasionally a boom box would play the most enchanting tunes – though mostly there was this awful stuff called Hip Hop, and Rap. One fine evening a saxophonist accompanied himself with some exotic ancient tunes of Duke Ellington, Fats Waller and Cole Porter. The unexpected riffs and passages seemed almost like a conversation amongst the instruments themselves. The Rakoos sang and danced most gleefully.



Chapter 9

But when the nights grew longer Father Harold said that it was time they return to the Italian Garden. He reminded them that there was important work to do while they may. Before winter, he said they have to gather the garden bounty. Everyone was sad at the news but of course, Uncle Nick and Aunt Rosie understood best. None of the children grasped the urgency but then looking ahead is not a feature of little ones – they occupy themselves solely with the present – lucky devils that they are.

The trip home had to be elaborately planned because no one wanted to risk an encounter with another Wild dog. Mother Philippa had developed a friendship with two Canada Geese and together with Father Harold they had decided that the Geese would fly the whole family back to the Garden.

What a wonderful break! The adults all thought it best to go at sunrise when the geese awoke. During the night they packed their knapsacks with presents of birch bark, cinnamon scrolls saved from Starbucks coffee and the rare juniper berries the Nick Rakoos had in their part of the park. At dawn, which was a particularly fine one streaked with pinks and violets, the lengthy goodbyes were all said and promises to visit the Italian

Garden party on New Year's were made. Mother Philippa climbed aboard Isabel, the female Goose with Evelina and Father Harold mounted her husband, Jerry, with Jean and Tim. Because of the extra weight, the Geese had to run along the ground for a small patch to lift off. They lofted heavily up into the bright October morning, the air still warm and breezy. They sailed up, up into the sky slowly gaining speed, leaving the other

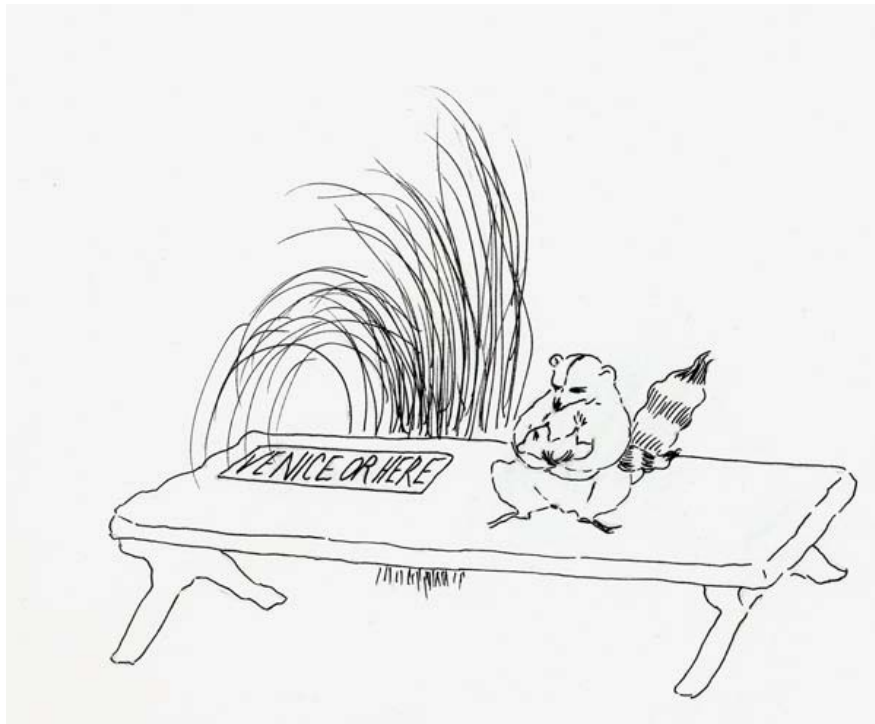


Rakoo family down below wildly waving their tiny white handkerchiefs. The Pump House gang rapidly shrunk before their eyes as the Geese flew yet higher and higher. Soon the little family was obliterated by trees. Then the Pump House disappeared from view altogether. The Geese approached the Cast Iron Bridge and the family shuddered. Happily now they were free of menacing Hounds and any other unpleasant encounters.

How glorious! Even though it was way past their bedtime they were awake. It was such a novel experience. They passed over the tennis courts and sailed along the Bridal Path and along the 102nd Street pass. They flew over the rolling hills south of the Gardens. Passing over the English Garden, they noticed that the annuals had been cut down. The Gardeners were busy planting tulip bulbs for spring. Yum! They made a mental note to return. Isabel and Jerry asked whether it was alright if they landed in the Meer and, of course, the party was agreeable. Down they splashed into the familiar water and paddled over to the beach on the Eastern shore. There's a sandy strip where turtles sun themselves on offshore rocks and the Geese graze on the grassy knolls behind. The little family dismounted and thanked Isabel and Jerry profusely. By then the little ones were so drowsy they hardly could keep their eyes open. Father Harold asked The Know Nothing Meer what had happened while they were gone but to any question it only answered, "I wonder, I wonder." It always said it twice. Then they made their way back through the French Garden.

At the north end of the Gardens not far from the great stone steps leading out of the water to the ring path were the quince bushes. Loads of quinces had already fallen on the dew covered earth. It was necessary to gather them immediately before spoiling. Back at the arbor Mother Philippa and Father Harold hung them out to dry one at a time like wash. With plenty of encircling air they could be preserved for winter. Over the next successive nights they took many trips to get every last one. The Rakoos gathered acorns, Ginkgo and pine nuts in their loosely woven twig baskets. In the next weeks this intense work occupied them each night. This was their busiest time of year. They wandered into the English Garden to the south to dig up the newly planted tulip bulbs which had been carefully set under ground in zigzag patterns of different colors. They lingered at the fountain where they'd found the purple water lily.

To rest Mother Philippa and Father Harold and Evelina, Jean and Tim sat on the left most bench at the top end of the pond. On the next to the last wooden slat almost covered by a stand of variegated grass there was a small, all but invisible bronze plaque which read, "Venice or Here." They had read the plaque many times before and it always drew contented smiles. They felt that anyone who understood its secret was rich indeed. Though they had never been to Venice – there was no need to imagine what *that* was like – because each one knew for him or herself that Here was Paradise enough on Earth.



■ THE END ■

THE RACCOONS OF CENTRAL PARK

BY

■ DOVE BRADSHAW ■