

A PORCUPINE NIGHT

By Chris Ellis

There is a long avenue lined by jacarandas that leads up to our cottage hospital gates. In spring they leave a carpet of mauve flowers on the ground.

Last week I was driving out of the hospital down the avenue after a late night call when my headlights picked up an animal moving across the narrow tarmac. It was a porcupine. In fact, a baby, hardly bigger than a hedgehog.

It stopped still in its tracks and then proceeded to stare. I sat behind the wheel and waited. It seem transfixed by the headlights so I gently switched them off. It sat down. I flashed the lights. There was still no action, so I slowly eased myself out of the car in my best highway patrol manner.

Although it was small, I had heard that if they were angry these things could shoot their quills at you. You never know whether these stories about Africa are true or not, do you? It is because of such stories that I never go near swans in case I get my arm broken, so I was not about to test the porcupine hypothesis in darkest night in darkest Africa.

I talked to it in my therapeutic voice. A voice that has calmed a thousand brows. I appealed to its reason. It was small and I was big and other facts about life in the fast lane. It had no effect. It just looked at me with sad watery eyes. I then changed tactics to my authoritarian voice. Absolutely no response. Just those offended penetrating eyes.



I now decided on action and walked to the side of the road to look for a stick with which I could gently push it off the road. The only one I could find was an intimidating four foot branch. I advanced slowly forward shielding my eyes against an anticipated avalanche of flying quills, the like of which would not have been seen since Agincourt.

Cautiously I leaned forward and touched it with the end of the branch. It immediately bristled up in what I thought was an unnecessarily menacing and truculent manner.

It was at this point that another car arrived. The driver got out and solicitously inquired what exactly his intrepid local GP was doing with that large branch he was hiding behind his back. I started to explain what I was about when he bent down to pick the little chap up. I warned him it was in an ugly mood.

"Yes," he said, as he picked it up in his hands and put it on the grass verge, "hedgehogs can be very dangerous."

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