

# Sarah's Accident

I'm not sure how I should start this story or even how to put it into writing to express my feelings of horror, grief and depression. It is just too painful to think about, but if I can, it may help me come to terms with it. To be blunt, I thought I had killed Sarah!

It happened very late on a Thursday night (1<sup>st</sup> December 2005) on a return journey from Adelaide - 2.00am-ish to be precise. I should preface the next paragraph by saying that our driveway is about 700m in length (¾ km) and is frequented by an assortment of wildlife, especially at night. Needless to say, at that time of the night the last 700m home is a bit of a risky business and I am always extremely careful of what's lurking in the shrubbery at the side of the track and especially that year as it has been a very wet one, so the growth on the trackside shrubbery had just gone berserk and was very dense.

Anyway, we had almost reached the house and, as usual I was driving at walking pace and saw two of our wombats (Barrelbum and Wombles) off to my right in the gloom of the extremities of my headlights and at that precise moment the front left hand side of the car gave a lurch. I stop instantly, got out to see what I had run over, but saw nothing. I saw nothing before, during or after the lurch although Jan thought she saw something dash off into the darkness. Barrelbum was still standing watching us, as was Wombles. I then saw Chunky (another of our handraised wombats) looking at us from a distance as if to say "what've you got for me" but no sign of Sarah. My immediate thought was that I had run over her, but as I had not seen or heard anything, I could not be sure, even though I had that nasty sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The following morning I checked the spot in daylight and only found a single scratch mark on the drive (from what could have been a front paw) and some fresh tracks to a warren entrance some distance away which looked like a wombat running at speed.

By the following Saturday I had not seen Sarah since the day before the event, which in itself is unusual, as she is usually the one animal who is out most often and always wanders up to you looking for a handout. She is often spotted during the day sunning herself at a burrow entrance. I could not help but assume that I had run over her and she had taken off to the nearest burrow to die a miserable death from who knows what sort of horrific injuries. At the time I could not say for sure that it was Sarah, but not having seen her for two days is MOST unusual.

You occasionally hear of these terrible accidents of parents who, through no fault of their own, reverse over a child in their driveway – I now know exactly how they feel.

Sarah was like family – correction Sarah *is* family! I would look out of the front room window where I would often see her lying about somewhere. Now all I could see was nothing! I had the feeling that I may have to live with this for the rest of my life and I was not sure how to cope with it! This may sound silly but I find talking to people about this sort of thing, difficult. I have no-one to blame but myself and I thought perhaps that by putting it into writing, it might make me feel better. Try and imagine if you had run over your favourite pet, how you would feel. The worst part was that not only did I think I had killed her but she had been carrying a baby in her pouch and Lord knows how that had fared. If she had been mortally injured and was lying low somewhere I might have been able to take the joey and hand raise it if only I could find her. But at that stage I still didn't even know if it was her – I had no evidence, apart from her disappearance.

They say thirteen is unlucky for some – not for me. Thirteen days after Sarah's disappearance I went across to our wombat enclosures with four buckets in my hands, one for each feed dish. I

emptied the first one into a dish and then stood up and turned around to walk to the next one and there was Sarah!!!! Standing quietly behind me!! I didn't know whether to laugh or cry! As I turned she walked very slowly towards me and I could immediately see that she had lost a lot of weight and she had this enormous swelling around her neck. The first thing I did was to check her pouch to see if she still had her baby – she did, and it moved, so it was still alive more to the point **SHE** was ALIVE, and better yet - she was hungry.



The lump under her neck was so huge she could not eat out of the feed dishes we provide. The side of the dish kept getting in the way and it was obviously painful because when she tried to eat the lump would foul the side of the dish and she would recoil in pain. I then tipped her food on the floor so at least she could reach it. She got stuck into it straight away with great gusto – she must have been starving.

Whilst she was eating I stood there looking at her trying to decide the best course of action. My immediate thought was to catch her up and take her to the vet but on reflection, not knowing what sort of internal damage she had sustained I was concerned that if I picked her up I would cause more damage. I knew she would kick and struggle if I tried to do that and she was no lightweight, despite her obvious weight loss. I guessed she was probably around 25kgs and she should have been closer to 30kgs. So I decide to err on the side of caution and leave well alone and to ring our Vet to ask for her advice. I thought perhaps she could provide me with some injectable pain killers and anti-inflammatories without having to subject Sarah to the trauma of being manhandled (or should that be person handled?) and then transported to the Vet's surgery. Now I had sighted her at least I could keep an eye on her and watch for any changes to her condition and administer any drugs without the trauma of carting her about.

Our Vet was more than happy to help out and I picked up the drugs the following Monday. But 'Murphy' and his pesky law came to spoil the picnic. Sarah disappeared again and I was unable to administer any of the drugs the vet had provided me. I waited and waited and walked across to her enclosure at all times of the day and night but she refused to put in an appearance. She was somewhere underground in one of her extensive burrows. She eventually surfaced again on the Friday two days before Christmas (that was twenty three days after the event). So now I had no choice. I had to catch her up and confine her to somewhere convenient to I treat her. I had to be able to have access to her on a daily basis and put in a place



close to the house where we could administer the antibiotics.

We set up a 'hospital' room in our Pug and Pine Cottage (an old building next door to our main house).



This being December, our summertime, the temperatures had become very hot, not unusual at that time of year. It was not too bad in the cottage but it was not air conditioned and somewhat open to the elements. I was a bit concerned that the warm weather would have a detrimental affect on Sarah's recovery and she was not too impressed with it either and started to show signs of distress. (Wombats will start to overheat and become distressed in temperatures over 35C (95F)). There was nothing else for it but to take her into the main house under the air conditioner. She immediately parked herself in front of a personal fan we had placed on the floor to draw cool air from one room to the other.

At this stage we had been through all the antibiotics that the Vet had provided but poor Sarah was not showing any signs of improvement. The vet had also given me some very large needles to hopefully relieve the pressure that was obviously building up inside this swelling under her chin. These needles

would make the most needle hardened person tremble with fear – they were huge but certainly did the job. We had to use them to puncture the swelling and relieve the pressure – not an easy or pleasant job and you should have seen the stuff that came out – Shudder!!!!

Despite all this treatment Sarah still did not show any signs of improvement, in fact she was getting worse. The swelling was increasing in size, was as tight as a drum and obviously becoming more and more uncomfortable.

Christmas came and went. I rang the Vet immediately after the Christmas, New Year break and told her the story and suggested to her that we should bring Sarah to her to have this swelling looked at – opened up if necessary. She agreed. We transported Sarah to the Vet in one of our



wombat boxes and left her, and the box, with the Vet. She took one look at Sarah's swelling and was horrified. She said it would definitely need to be opened up and that she would operate the next day.

It was now over four weeks since the 'event'. At that stage we did not know the extent of the problem and our Vet was concerned that Sarah may have ruptured her windpipe or oesophagus. We had this nasty feeling that she would not get through the operation particularly as our Vet went to a great deal of trouble to impress upon us that she might not survive the procedure, especially if there was damage to the oesophagus and infection was being continually sourced from any foodstuffs that she consumed by leaking into the cavity beneath her neck. Apparently any small rupture of the windpipe or oesophagus could be nigh on impossible to find. It would only take a very small hole to cause this sort of problem. We left the surgery with heavy hearts and feelings of trepidation.



The next twenty four hours were very very long indeed.

The following day our Vet rang just before she started the operation to tell us just that i.e. that she was about to start; but needed to be reassured by us that if she found any major problem what should she do? She needed affirmation from us as to whether to press on or to euthanase, knowing our finances were limited. Silly question really! This was around 3pm. I told her to proceed but to ring if she came across anything that could be classed as terminal. Two hours went by

and we still had not heard anything and were starting to worry but then no news was good news (or so I believed). Knowing the surgery normally closed at six I said to Jan that if she hadn't rung by six, I would ring her. Six o'clock came and went and I paced up and down waiting for the phone to ring but kept putting off picking it up myself. It eventually rang at about twenty past six. I had dived on the 'phone before the end of the first ring. It was the Vet (of course). She said the operation had gone reasonably well and that Sarah was in recovery. She had removed over a litre of blood, puss and foul smelling fluid from Sarah's neck but could not find any rupture of the oesophagus or windpipe so the prognosis was reasonably good, although not out of the woods yet. We heaved a collective sigh of relief and lived to fight another day. All this time Sarah had still maintained her joey in her pouch.





Then came the daily donkey work. We had to irrigate and clean Sarah's wound daily as well as give her another round of injections for another ten days. By the end of that time she knew exactly what was coming when Jan picked her up and I walked towards her with 'something' in my hand. Despite this she was amazingly good and never once attempted to bite anybody and her joey was growing in size and seemingly unaffected by all the traumas Mum was experiencing.

We were now well on the road to recovery and she was starting to enjoy herself exploring the house and generally making a nuisance of herself. She would dive into the clothes basket in the bedroom and there was the night she leapt on our bed at 3.30 in the morning, following which, we kept her locked up in her box overnight. An experience she seemed to cope with very well and slept very peacefully all night (as did the rest of the household).



Mind you, we did let her roam around the house during the evening and at the time we were handraising two orphaned Western Grey Kangaroo joeys (Wallace & Grommit) and she would insist on walking up to them to investigate – something they were not too sure about.

By now we had removed the drain in Sarah's neck and the hole was beginning to heal but I did not want let her go back into her enclosure until it had healed completely for fear of something getting into it and the infection reoccurring. However Sarah had other ideas. She would sit on the lounge and look out of the window as if to say "Please can I go home" but eventually gave up and settled down for a doze.

However, the time was obviously getting closer to her being reacquainted with her own home.

And so the day eventually arrived and after examining her neck, even though it had not healed completely we let her return to her enclosure under her own steam. The day was the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January which was seven weeks following that



fateful day. After that the house seemed somehow empty despite the fact we still had Wallace & Grommit to care for.

On the following pages I have reproduced a series of photos of Sarah making her own way back home which say it all really. She was obviously pleased to be back in her own environment and her joey survived well and at the time of writing has vacated the pouch and has been 'parked' somewhere underground where Sarah will protect it for some weeks to come. I hope sometime not too far into the future she will bring it to the surface and allow us to see it.

Sarah is a very accommodating animal and is always happy to checkout any newcomers (either human or non human) without any fuss. To date, apart from the occasional friendly soft nip, I have never known her bite anybody. But, I guess there is always a first time!!



Is this the way out?



I remember this



This is where I got run-over



Nearly home



Thanks for all the help



See Ya!