

The Dark Night

By Esther Pearson

Dedicated to the bat in Apartment 5 and to George and Diana, who first encouraged me to tell the story and then write it down.

He'd been tucked up warm and cozy in the fireplace chimney for several weeks now, fading in and out of consciousness in a state of semi-hibernation. Although he'd heard the girl come and go every day, it'd taken him awhile to get a feel for her schedule and feel comfortable enough to come out, knowing she'd be gone till evening.

When the door closed that morning and he heard the deadbolt sink home, he knew it was time. She'd be gone for 9 hours at least.

Just to make sure the place was really empty, Fred gave a test squeak.

Silence.

All clear.

Fred stretched his wings, shook out a crick in his back, and sifted silently downward to the light at the bottom of the tunnel. There was something reminiscent of a split chainlink fence across the opening, but the gap in the middle was large enough to squeeze through without even sucking in his stomach.

Another grate blocked his way, but this one was set further away, almost as if to invite him into the living room.

As soon as Fred drifted over the top of the second grate, a tantalizing aroma drenched his senses: leftover egg drippings from breakfast. The slightly raw note of the aroma told him that the eggs had been cooked sunny side up, with the yolk still runny—his favorite. Ethel (his wife) would've loved them, too, but she was hibernating in a neighboring chimney and had kicked him out of the house for breathing too loud and waking her up. Never mind. She'd let him come back when spring came again. She was always in a better mood when she's woken from her winter's nap.

"Never wake a woman in hibernation," he thought. Or so his dad had always told him.

That'd never been a problem until his asthma had flared up a few years ago. Damn humans. What were they burning these days for wood—something like eco-logs? He'd seen the paper wrappings that lit on fire with one flick of a lighter. Didn't even have to have brains to light a fire these days. Bats hardly got any warning before the log caught fire and sent blazing heat up the chimney.

The smell of yolk drippings had given him a jolt of energy he hadn't felt since the last time he and Ethel had got it on. That was before the last leaves had blown off the rooftops and the first snowflakes drifted down. She hadn't let him near her since.

The egg pan was still on the stove. The yolks hadn't even had time to get crusty yet, and Fred licked the gold liquid greedily.

After the last drop of yolk was gone and his stomach was satisfied, Fred took a good look around. As his eyes swept over the dining table and back towards the living room, his heart gave a leap and a thrill fluttered across his wingspan. A vaulted ceiling. Better yet—a vaulted ceiling with a beam hanging from the peak. The beam reminded him of the stories his granddad used to tell about hanging from stalactites back in the cave-bat days. The bigger the stalactite, the more you could impress the girls. That dark wood beam was just the right color for blending in with his surroundings. And just the right height for a long, warm nap.

As the yolk hit his stomach, Fred felt his eyelids droop. The only question was, would he have time to get back to the fireplace before the girl arrived home? Surely he wouldn't nap that long. A few hours of blissful shut-eye couldn't hurt.

Fred swooped up to the beam, let his heavy eyes droop shut, and let his body fall limp, suspended from the wooden stalactite. His right knee buckled under him, and he shifted his weight to the left leg. Old war wound from his Army days. The piece of shrapnel stuck in his knee still bothered him, but it was nothing a stiff drink or a long nap couldn't fix.

Cla-clunk. Fred awoke with a jerk. The sudden noise had pulled him out of a dream of the belltower he'd grown up in, where he'd been making out with his first girlfriend. Inexperienced as he was, he'd bitten her wing too hard and she'd been bawling him out.

At the sound of the door opening, Fred's senses snapped back to reality, and he knew exactly what was happening. He'd been caught. The girl was home, and he was still snuggled up on the beam in plain sight. In the split second before the door opened, Fred caught sight of a bank of windows along one wall and knew that was his only hope of escape.

With a surge of adrenaline, he streaked towards the far window, aiming directly for the clear shot to safety. With a dull thud, Fred hit a solid object, fumbled in mid-air, whipped into a tight U-turn, just before hitting the wall, and streaked back towards the vaulted ceiling. Anything closer to the sky gave him hope of finding a way out. As the girl stepped through the doorway, it was as if she triggered a panic button in Fred's chest, and he flew crazily between the far window and the peak of the vaulted ceiling, hardly knowing where he was going anymore, driven purely by fear and instinct.

The girl let out a low whoosh of air—half grunt, half cry of terror.

Should he swoop at her? Try to intimidate her? No, he reasoned. Though she'd let out a cry of surprise at first, she did not look like a woman easily intimidated. She did not run or scream or throw her hands over her head as other women had done.

He was stuck. Stuck with a woman without the decency to run away screaming and slam the door in his face, leaving him free to sip egg yolk to his heart's content and slip lazily in and out of hibernation mode on the vaulted beam. As long as he was stuck in such an undesirable situation, he might as well make the most of it. Fred flitted back up to the beam and flipped upside down to see what the woman would do next.

To Fred's surprise, the woman moved from her frozen state inside the doorway, crept into the kitchen galley, and began to cook supper. The aroma made him drool, but he knew better than to beg for leftovers. Even a woman that brave wouldn't care to share dinner with a bat. It seemed he had been left to his own devices, he thought, as the girl crouch-walked around the apartment, sometimes shutting herself in the bedroom, sometimes talking to herself with an object held to her ear.

He was safe. Or so he thought. The semi-darkness had lulled Fred into a state of semi-consciousness, but when the room suddenly flooded with light, his instincts began to sense danger. Was she about to act?

A whiff of air rushed past Fred. She was...what? Trying to knock him off the beam? No. No! No way he was going to spook that easily. If he was going to get taken down by a woman, he was going to go down fighting all the way.

Whoosh.

This time Fred couldn't ignore it. Something had whacked him behind the shoulder blades and caused him to lose his grip on the wooden beam.

Instinct kicked in again, and he began to fly desperately back and forth, following his prior flight pattern from the far window to the vaulted peak. There was no way he could let her catch him. The guys down at the VFW would never let him live it down.

Every so often he felt another whoosh of air close by his left ear. On a U-turn back towards the window, the whoosh grew louder and a sudden blow to the head knocked him to the ground. Memories of Ethel flashed before his eyes. He could only vaguely recall what happened after that. Faint sounds reached his ears. A deep voice calling out, "Are you all right?" (Fred struggled to answer back but could not.) Feeling his body dragged across the floor, turned upside down like a hamster wheel, darkness closing in again, the sound of doors opening and closing, a heavy lid slamming shut.

Fred reckoned he must have passed out after that. Next thing he remembered was hearing a dump truck rumble up beside him. He felt himself lifted, flipped over, tumbling down, then free. Free! He was free to fly. Free to flutter. Free to squeak and scuttle. Fred shook a banana peel off his shoulder and tested one wing, then the other. Everything seemed to work.

His first thought was of Ethel. Would she miss him? Would she take him back after knowing how close she had come to losing him?

She might. He had to try.

Throwing a few kinks out of his wings that had been cramped for so long, Fred rode the upsurge of an icy wind and soared toward the neighboring chimney.