

**CCW 2010 Writing Contest
Winner for Fiction**

Epoch

BY

Linda Barnhart

“There used to be more, hundreds,” the girl insists, waving her puffy hands in the air, “like black lace in the sky at night.” She’s talking about the bats under the eaves of her grandmother’s carriage barn, a garage of late. Mouse-eared bats, little browns or *Myotis lucifugus* if you prefer the Latin. “Last night,” she continues, “I bet I was out here ten minutes before I saw one.” She looks like a goth who’s trying to quit. Her blue-black hair is growing out dirty blonde and there’s a hole in the side of her nose where there must have been a stud. She’s lined her lips in a

deep red, but on a small puckered mouth the effect is more childlike than threatening or seductive.

She reminds me of my kid, Joel, a misfit of sorts, a thistle in a grand sweep of daisies, matchstick thin with a globe of brown hair and cheeks seared by acne. At his age I would have ingested strychnine if it would have cleared up my skin. He, on the other hand, is wary of antibiotics of any kind, especially the implications of long-term use, and refuses to try anything stronger than over-the-counter solutions. I can’t resist teasing him once in a while. “Not asteroids or war in the Middle East, but bacteria, that’s what will get us in the end, right?” Unfortunately he’s too young to poke fun at himself and he ignores me. Recently, however, he’s gone from a sullen mope to a state of purposeful euphoria, although I’m not sure I appreciate the reason. He and his friend, Mike, suddenly fancy themselves ghost hunters. They tool around in Joel’s beat-up Subaru searching for abandoned buildings in hope of encountering

an apparition, a trapped and tortured soul. I told him the tortured soul would be me, a single mother who's already received one call from a township policeman wanting to know what my car was doing parked near an old house on Bryan Road late at night. The car, you see, is registered in my name.

"But, Mom, it's haunted," he pleaded when confronted. I was familiar with the place. It's been a burned-out shell since the early 1960s. "Mike says the guy who lived there killed his family. He torched the place because he was, you know, doing it with his son."

"I doubt it was consensual."

"His wife and daughter died in the fire. They caught him in Maryland with the kid in a cheap motel."

"Joel," I protested. I had heard a similar story about the house, or what's left of it, as a teenager, but in the earlier version the abused child was a girl. "Why do ghosts

always have to be the embodiment of people wronged, who died violently, who lived too hard or not hard enough? Why can't they be an eighty-year-old woman who worked in a department store, played the organ, and had a cat named Muffin, who checks out over her oatmeal some morning, huh? Tell me that?"

He's having none of it. "There's more, no wait, wait, he got the death penalty, the electric chair, that's how they executed guys back then and Mike said his head caught on fire."

"Ok, that's enough." I've told him on many occasions that I don't believe in spirits. There was a time when I enjoyed and entertained the idea of them, in the abstract that is, but that time is gone. There are plenty of people on top of the grass nursing a grudge or with an axe to grind that I don't need to visit the graveyard or wherever it is that ghosts prefer to congregate in the twenty-first century.

My eyes follow the urine stains discoloring the yellow siding to the source, the red fascia along the roofline of the barn. Rice-sized pellets of guano dot the green windowsills on the ground floor. Bat feces has a distinctive smell. It's a warm organic odor that slowly burns the senses, not the gut-churning stench of human or dog waste. And this barn bears the aroma of a substantial colony. After sundown the bats that live here will slip out incrementally, in squadrons of three or four, falling down fast, only to rise, dart, and feast on a buffet of insects, preferably a generous helping of mosquitoes.

Judging from the eastern location, there is probably an abundance of morning sun. This barn may also function as a maternity ward; the bachelors can tolerate a little cooler temperature. With the segregation of the sexes and the exception of celibacy, bats are not unlike some of our nineteenth-century utopian societies, such as the Harmonists, right here in Pennsylvania.

“So are you going to tag them or anything?” the girl asks.

“We’ve already banded hundreds in the northeast and these are almost certainly pregnant. We wouldn’t want to disturb them right now.”

“There are a few behind the shutters on the front porch,” she adds.

I nod. “Probably the males, we’ll take a look before I go. Let me know if you find any dead. Put them in a bag, but please, remember to wear gloves. Don’t touch them.” She’s called me because she’s been reading about White-Nose Syndrome and as a volunteer with a bat conservation group, I was quoted in one of the articles. Her timing was excellent. My pet-sitting service has a client close by, an elderly Himalayan cat with a thyroid condition whose owners, excuse me, *parents*, are in Turkey on business.

In years gone by, human interaction was the primary cause of winter starvation for hibernating bats. Kids exploring caves roused the slumbering animals, who in turn took flight, consuming fat stores that were supposed to last until spring with no bug population to replenish them. Now it's this bizarre fungus, cropping up on the face and wing membranes, mysterious to the extent nobody knows yet whether it's the cause or a symptom of a condition that robs bats of white and brown adipose tissue. Some never awake from hibernation, others too soon, like the past victims of rampaging spelunkers. It's already decimated colonies in New England and New York and now has the mid-Atlantic region in the crosshairs.

A stooped, round-shouldered woman in a straw hat emerges from the rear door of the gray-shingled house. Using a three-pronged cane, she stabs her way toward us through a lawn broken up by great swathes of purple-and-peach-colored bearded iris.

“Had my hip done six weeks ago,” she grumbles. “They told me I’d be dancing by now.”

“Could you dance before?” I laugh. She grins broadly. “Sorry, bad joke.”

“Melanie here’s all worked up over these bats. Always got her beak glued to the computer reading up on them.” The girl’s gaze jumps back and forth between the old woman and me, smiling slyly at me as if the two of us are in on a joke or share some kind of secret. “But I don’t like them,” the woman continues. “Ugly little things and they stink. Put me in mind of my first husband. He was easier to get rid of, though.”

“Is there a creek nearby?” I ask.

“Don’t know whether you’d call it a creek or not, more of a rill or a run.” She lifts her cane five or six inches off the ground, pointing south. “Over the bank about fifty yards.”

“There would almost have to be to sustain a large colony.”

“Used to be, you could hire a company to poison them, the bats, but that’s no good. Carl Raudabaugh, down the road toward the post office, he did that and you know his boy was always sick, respiratory problems,” she says, glancing toward the eaves of the barn. “Then when he was older, he broke into the township building and stole the copper pipes, but I don’t think that had anything to do with the poison.”

Melanie rolls her eyes. “So I can get a hold of you if I notice anything unusual?” she asks, twirling a strand of her blue-black hair.

“Of course.”

“Young lady, you need to concentrate more on finding a job and less on these rats with wings.”

The old woman lumbers back inside and Melanie and I stroll toward the front of the house by a stand of gnarled lilacs, their fragrant crop over now and parallel to a privet hedge as tall as a railcar and invaded by silver maple saplings. The porch floor is red and peeling, the furniture aluminum with woven nylon seats. A big yellow cat snoozing on one of them raises his head, blinks at us sleepily, and then yawns. Melanie, bouncing ahead of me, reaches a dusty green shutter and twists the hardware to release it from the wall. Agitated by our interloping, the bats take to chattering, which doesn’t go unnoticed by our feline friend, who gracefully exits his chair to sit at our feet.

There are four of them, compact gray-brown dust balls, heads facing down, and wings like black tissue paper folded close to their bodies. I’m reassured by what I see. These bats have healthy coats, faces clear of fungus, and best of all, they’re plump and responsive.

“Shoo, Barney,” Melanie says to the cat, nudging him with her foot.

* * *

It’s July, Saturday morning, nearly noon. I’m using a knife to retrieve a ragged hunk of English muffin from the toaster when a bleary-eyed Joel shuffles into the kitchen.

“You were out late last night,” I say, scraping a pat of butter from the plate. “You need to be in by twelve. What time did you leave Rudy’s?” Rudy’s is a steakhouse where he found a job washing dishes.

“Ten-thirty.”

“So where’d you go after?”

“Mike’s.”

“What’s this?” I ask, easing into a chair at the table and picking up a small black gadget keeping his keys company. *Electro Smart*, it reads.

“It measures EMF levels,” he says, a degree of agitation in his voice.

I sigh, “Electromagnetic fields.” I should have guessed. When I went into his room to change the sheets a few days ago, the first thing I noticed, after the sour aroma of adolescent male, was the array of ghost-hunting equipment on his dresser—an air probe thermometer, a digital voice recorder, a flashlight with colored lenses. “So this is where your greenbacks are going. What about college? Your father isn’t going to pay for everything, you know.”

“I thought paying was the one thing we could count on him to do.” I make a face that says *Let’s not go there*. He swipes the Electro Smart back toward his keys

protectively. “Mike’s saving for a motion-sensor scouting camera. Then we’ll be set. Something moves, we’ve got it. We’re going to use it at his cousin’s house. A guy shot himself with a twelve-gauge in the bedroom. There’s a stain on the floor, in the wood. They had it refinished, but the outline of where they found the body keeps coming back.”

“Maybe it’s time for carpet, a nice Berber,” I sigh, this time more dramatically. Given that he’s not the most sociable of young men—Mike is his only close friend—I’m not entirely comfortable with this preoccupation with blood and gore. And I can’t help wondering what’s fueling his obsession with the supernatural. At his age it can’t be a head-on collision with his own mortality. Chalk it up then, I suppose, to an old-fashioned yen for adventure, an appetite for fear and to be afraid and, to a certain extent, to be tested. And by what precedes it, the creeping apprehension, the quaking, the muscle spasms that feel like a hand on the

shoulder, the ordinary screech of an owl that on that night sounds otherworldly and then *boo*, you’re running as hard as you can until you can barely feel the ground beneath your feet, until you can’t run anymore, you can’t speak, you can’t breathe, you probably can’t even stand up straight. It’s the best damn night of your life. Yeah, I do kind of remember that.

“Mom.... Mom,” he repeats, waving his hand in front of my face. “I forgot to tell you, a girl called yesterday. I think her name was Melody.”

“Melody? Oh, Melanie. Thanks.”

* * *

The bats I’ve been monitoring this summer at various sites have been presenting normal, growing fat for winter with no abnormalities and a healthy dose of vigilance when we nosy humans are prowling around their roosts. And now Melanie goes and finds a dead one, a

female no less. She's placed it in a plastic sandwich bag to which she affixed a computer-generated label listing the date, time of day, and where she found it—the eastern perimeter of her grandmother's barn.

A quick visual inspection on my part reveals nothing out of the ordinary, but I'm delivering it to a friend of mine, a biologist with the game commission. "Don't fret," I tell Melanie, inserting the bag into a small Styrofoam chest. "It probably has nothing to do with White-Nose." She's pale and jittery as if she's let me down somehow. "You did the right thing." I hadn't noticed before that her eyes were such a deep blue and so wide-set. She looks like a creature made for a cold climate and not a muggy mid-Atlantic summer.

When Joel mentioned that she had called, I asked him if he knew her from school. She only just graduated this year. After thinking for a moment, he furrowed his brow and curled his lip. "Oh, yeah, I know who you mean.

I heard her mother was in jail or maybe it was her dad. She's fat." I'd forgotten how well cruelty armors our young, how it fuses effortlessly to the hearts of those who seem the most vulnerable.

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"The Cenozoic Era, Eocene Epoch, that's how long bats have been here on planet Earth," my friend, Irv, says, taking the cold pack from me. "What now?" He shrugs his broad shoulders. "Development's bad enough, but White-Nose is bigger than habitat loss." He drains the last drop of root beer and tosses the empty into a recycling bin, where it forms the peak of an aluminum mound. There's a half-eaten cheese sandwich on his desk, the obvious source of the mustard stain on his shirt. Irv's a slob. I say this not to criticize, quite the contrary, it's just that minutia is off his radar. His face is all lines and pouches like a well-traveled leather duffle. He's eighteen months from retirement, tops, and then he's off to Arizona, a patch of desert he owns west

of Tucson. Permanently. I've been hearing this since I worked for him briefly after my divorce, before I opened my pet-sitting business.

"I'm sending her to a veterinary pathologist in Minnesota," he says, tapping tobacco from a foil pouch into his pipe, the bowl of which is shaped like a monkey's face. He's not supposed to smoke in the office, but who's going to stop him? "Fifty million years, it's a long run," he muses, striking a match.

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A group of us get together on Thursday nights after our tai chi class at a martini-and-sushi joint downtown. It's near the courthouse, and consequently the ghetto of attorneys who ply their trade within its granite confines. Once upon a time we kept our antennae trained on the bar, hoping to detect a wave of interest from the male clientele, but not as much anymore. We still look. We have a booth

in the back, the "hen pen" we call it, where we can raise our voices, pass the California rolls, and pull each other up out of the ruts in life.

There's Trish, who works as a receptionist for an orthopedic surgeon; Jess, who teaches middle-school English; and Elaine, who manages a card shop at the mall. Jess usually shows us all up with tales of sexually active eighth-graders or cheating scandals. She had a set of twins caught communicating during tests with sign language—they had a deaf brother, and the son of a judge who bought a paper on Mark Twain over the Internet clearly meant for a college-level course. Not that I haven't held my own with accounts of a diabetic St. Bernard or an African Gray Parrot named Butch with a filthy vocabulary, but tonight I clearly take the prize.

"I delivered a dead bat to my friend, Irv, for testing."

“Ooh,” they moan in unison.

“Was it rabid?” Jess asks.

“I don’t know, but I doubt it. That’s not as common in bats as people think.”

“You know, a bat tried to fly into my hair years ago,” Elaine says. “It got into my mother’s house. We were both scared to death. I eventually called the fire department.”

“That must have been during the eighties, when you had the big hair,” Trish hoots.

“It wasn’t trying to get in your hair, Elaine, that’s an old-wives’ tale,” I tell her wearily. If I hear one story about bats over and over, it has to do with their supposed nesting instinct for human hair.

Following dinner Elaine, Trish, and I take in a movie, a thriller set in Ireland and starring a Scottish actor

Trish has a crush on, then coffee at a Vietnamese restaurant adjacent to the theater. I enjoy the presentation, with the individual pots slowly infusing the sweet condensed milk with layers of strong brew. I order a slice of coconut cake, but when it arrives, decide to have it boxed to take home for breakfast. All things considered, it was a fine evening. Elaine kept her political views to herself, therefore sparing me the fireworks of an argument between her and Trish. And Trish, she only mentioned that immensely talented and gorgeous daughter of hers once and then merely in passing—this being the same kid Joel describes as an unrepentant snob and brownnoser.

Pulling up in front of the house, I’m pleased with the new low-voltage lighting in the arts-and-crafts style that I’ve had installed around the bungalow. Joel’s car is in the driveway and the television blinks at me from the living-room window.

“Hey there,” I call out, flipping the hall switch en route to the kitchen, coconut cake in hand. I’m weak and have decided it’ll make a nice midnight snack. Curiously he’s watching baseball. I hear the announcer say, “Lee pitched a four-hitter.” It’s a sport he professes not to care about anymore, no, make that hates, although it was a childhood passion.

I’m eating standing up, out of the styrofoam container, then stuffing it in the trash when I notice an opaque white bag from a discount store, the type I save and reuse in my business to clean litter boxes, with a washcloth, make that a bloody washcloth, protruding from between the handles. It’s yellow, embroidered with ferns, part of a set I purchased for guests, which in our house means my mother when she comes up from Florida. Using the lid of the styrofoam to whisk aside a barbecued chicken thigh, I remove the washcloth, but there’s more—a ribbon of soiled cotton gauze follows like entrails.

“Joel, what’s going on here?” I shriek, storming into the living room. “Where did all this blood come from?”

“Mom,” he groans from the sofa, his face in shadow, the television providing the only source of illumination. A quick adjustment of the rheostat rectifies the situation. It’s warm and humid this evening and yet he’s dressed in an oxford shirt, something he’d never wear outside of a wedding or funeral—too preppy. There’s a bulge on his right forearm as if it’s wrapped beneath the fabric.

“Is that blood on your shirt?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it out.”

“It’s not the shirt that concerns me. What did you do?”

“It’s nothing.”

“In the kitchen.”

“Oh... come on.”

“Now!” He swings his feet to the ground and stands unsteadily.

At the sink he grimaces as I ask him to remove his shirt. Then I have the unpleasant task of unwrapping a mummy’s worth of sloppily applied bandages. We finally get down to the skin and I’m suddenly feeling a little woozy. I hear myself wince, but set my jaw, straighten my back, and press on.

There’s a sizeable piece of flesh below the elbow, not unlike a tilapia filet, that I delicately lift to examine the extent of his injury. “Joel, oh God, that’s deep. You’re going to need some stitches. Did you clean this?”

“Sort of. I used peroxide.”

“I bet that hurt. Well, I’m going to leave that to a professional. How did this happen? At work? Did you tell the manager?” I rattle on.

“No, I was off, remember?”

I can feel his arm throbbing, his breath in my face. “Where then? Here? Did you fall? Let me get my keys. We’re going to the emergency room.”

“Promise you won’t get mad?”

“No.”

He clucks his tongue. “Mike and I were out at this old mill.”

“Do you mean the log one on Carson Road?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s posted. No trespassing.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Trust me, it is. I have a client on Carson, two cats I take care of when they go to Virginia Beach.”

“Well, I guess we didn’t see the signs. Maybe they fell down.”

“They fell down. Joel, you can’t just go traipsing over private property. It’s against the law.”

“Mom, we saw something. This time was for real, I swear, this orange glow coming from between the floorboards of the second floor. Mike was like, ‘We got to go up there, we got to go up.’”

“Mike,” I nod disbelievingly. “Get your shoes on.”

“Yeah, Mike, and so he’s going first, he’s ahead of me and he gets to the, I don’t know, third step and it breaks and he comes back on me. I fell into an old rake or something, ripped my arm up pretty bad.”

“I can see that, you idiot. What if you’d broken your arm or worse yet, your back? And what about Mike? Is he injured?”

“He’s fine. I broke his fall. But, Mom, listen, before we got out of there, we heard footsteps. I’m not making this up.” He’s dipping his big dogs into dirty sneakers.

“Joel, it was an animal, a squirrel or a groundhog. When was the last time you had a tetanus shot?”

“When I was eight and stepped on a nail in Pap Pap’s garage.” We’re on the porch and I’m locking the door behind me. “It wasn’t an animal. They were too heavy, too far apart.”

“Lower your voice and calm down. This could be a long night,” I say as we climb into the car. Yanking the transmission into gear, I glance up through the windshield. The sky is a bowl full of stars, the moon nearly full, perfect for hunting ghosts and all of the things we want to believe

in, but some of us don't really expect or even want to encounter, in old houses, and barns and rotted-out mills, and what's packed in hot and fetid, squirming within the folds and creases of our minds, waiting to take flight, waiting to free us, to be free of us. What we don't understand.