

The Bat
or
Fear, Loathing, and Dust Bunnies in Omaha
 By Dr. Rob S. Rice, Late of the University of Pennsylvania
(now of nothing in particular)

Memory being a flighty lady, and one prone to falsehood, the events taking place during my last visit to Omaha seem too precious, too rare—too outright weird—to be entrusted entirely to her. I can vouch, at the moment, for the truth of what appears below, but witnesses forget, exaggeration is a threat, and who knows but what something else may drive the whole thing from my mind. That's deuced unlikely, but it *could* happen, and I don't want it to.

Ahem. "More matter, less art," as Queen Gertrude said, some time before her rather gory death in Act V, which settled *her* hash, serve her right. On the other hand, poor old Polonius got ventilated in Act III, which might argue a higher mortality rate for the prolix. With THAT in mind...

They had raised the speed limits on I's 76 and 80 from Denver to Omaha to 85 miles per hour, and so perhaps, and it is likely, Mom and I were still a little wild-eyed when we arrived at my Grandfather's house that afternoon. My Uncle Don was under my grandfather's bed, which is not a usual position for him, he being notably abstemious and decorous in his conduct. He's a music teacher, and that's sort of required, you know. My grandfather is as unflappable, if older than, ever, capable of staring eighty some-odd years of U.S. history and the Clinton Administration in the face without blinking—so long as the Ancient Age holds out and people come to see him and get him to EAT something every now and then. He was responsible for my Uncle being under the bed, but not terribly exercised about it. Uncle Don, he said, was looking for the Bird.

As he told us, even as the glaze of high-speed motoring faded from our eyes, the night before he had an interesting and not particularly calming experience. He had woken to what sounded, to his experienced ear, like an outboard motor running directly underneath his bed (my Uncle's temporary location, remember). Now, my grandfather has had intimate acquaintance with nearly everything ever equipped with a piston, ranging from the long-mourned De Soto to planes, trains, and golf carts, which don't, actually, *have* pistons, but fit the same basic pattern—don't they? Did they ever have pistons? I don't know. At any rate, for some time he stared at the darkened ceiling, he told us, wondering exactly how that sound had happened to be underneath his box springs, only to have the sound stop. Hard on THAT came something *I*, at least, would have thought rather worse—a soft 'swish—swish—swish.' MY eyes would have been pushing against my glasses by that time, presuming that I'd found them, but Grandfather related the whole thing rather calmly, we thought. Grandfather had simply turned on the lights, and himself searched under the bed. It would be rather less unusual for him to be under there than my uncle, but still unusual, come to think of it, because he is, of course, nearly 'four score and seven..' Lincoln is the capital of Nebraska, by the way. Details like that add savor, don't you think?

The rest of the night and that morning pondering the subject had suggested to my Grandfather that some sort of flying thing was responsible for the sounds and sensations of the night before, and my Grandfather's relatively sanguine frame of mind—you've seen it all, at 86—had led him to the concept of "bird, under, bed," all of which had resulted in my Uncle's position beneath the box springs. Where he found nothing except what he said was 'fur.' It *could* have been fur, but under one's bed one tends to find the warrens of that most common of North American non-game species, the noble and prolific dust bunny, the beasts' presence confirmed, slightly apologetically, by my grandfather's cleaning creatures when they came the next day. No feathers, bird-turds, or anything else detected. My grandfather does, be it noted, HAVE a love bird, the brooding divorcee of a male love bird with a wandering eye and a sudden urge for freedom, which was tragically gratified by an open window some years previously. This creature at times receives the freedom of the house, but never seems to know what to do with it, and she had been securely caged that night. And so, the origin of the phantom of the night before remained a mystery, even as night fell and my mother and I went to our assorted beds. I was on the downstairs davenport, under which no room for anything, although I don't recall being particularly concerned with the possibility that something there might be. The mysterious bird had come in unseen, we had all agreed, and left unseen—much like my Uncle, once he was finished looking. I, too, I should say, was given a

flashlight and sent to investigate. I'm often found under beds, of course, being of a timid and acquisitive nature, traits that dovetail nicely. Mind you, I did make thorough use of said flashlight, once I'd found one functioning, and I, too, could only confirm the presence of the dust bunnies, who figure not at all in my further narrative of what took place.

Grandfather and I were left alone in the house the next day, while my mother went to look up girlhood friends in the company of her younger sister, my Aunt. Grandfather and I occupied ourselves with the wonders of the electronic age and the idiosyncrasies of a big-screen TV, which was getting remarkably poor reception for reasons never clearly understood. We had cable. Grandfather, having spent a lifetime buying and selling things, quite enjoys "The Price is Right," and it was only a little after Bob Barker bowed goodbye that the first truly exciting sighting occurred.

It came in up the basement stairwell and performed several neat orbits in the front hall before it returned briefly to the darkness of the lower storey. Yes, I know it's the British spelling. My graduate advisor (of Scottish ancestry, true) was as British as tea and Creamora. We always agreed on tea, fortunately, which paved the way for other agreements and my complete, if completely useless, Ph.D. My grandfather looked over at it and said, "Well, there's my bird!"

My own reaction was one of great control and aplomb, I thought, and constituted of looking over at him calmly and saying, "Why, yes it is, and for \$50 I will admit before witnesses that I saw it, too." One develops certain reflexes during a period of half-funded graduate study, and that was their manifestation. On the other hand, I've been my grandfather's grandson even longer than I was a graduate student (it just seemed longer), and the next thing I knew, and for quite some time afterwards, I was expected to do something about the flying entity that had interrupted our mutual enjoyment of the Republican Convention in San Diego. I had just been to San Diego, and kept pointing out the places to which I personally had beaten Bob Dole.

At about that time the flying thing reappeared, this time transferring its orbits much closer to where Grandfather and I had been sitting and watching TV—in the Living Room. Grandfather handed me his cane, which seemed to represent his opinion of what should be done to our unexpected visitor. I would have suggested a badminton racquet, if anyone had asked me, first of all, because I rather LIKE badminton, although I never get a chance to play it, and second—well, I don't think the relative advantages over my grandfather's cane really need to be elaborated. And so, brandishing said blunt implement, I soon found myself in the center of the creature's orbits. I don't think, note, that it ever wanted to fly over, around, and past me—it just wanted to be elsewhere than it was, and I kept turning up in that place.

I can be, not always, but this time, reasonably observant, and I noted two things about the little flittering thing flying around me. First of all, no 'whish' of feathers. I had had a pigeon colony outside my bedroom for some time in Philadelphia, and knew THAT sound well enough. Second—well. My grandfather's large picture window -cum -door was both reasonably clean and fastened shut. Unpleasant previous experiences of my own had told me of what that combination often produces in our flying feathered friends, and, although this creature was certainly zooming around the place with zeal and urgency, every time he came near the window, there was not the expected SPLAT. A final observation—birds have a square tail, this had a triangular tail, and by that time I had made it reasonably clear to myself and anyone within earshot that Grandfather's bird was, in fact, Grandfather's little brown possibly-rabid BAT, whose little brown possibly-rabid sonar was warning him away, now, and in the future, from the closed picture window.

I had had the pleasure, morbid pleasure, at least, of reading the enlightening tale of a young boy back in Colorado who had picked up a bat found within his own home, been bitten, and died of rabies as a reward for his investigative zeal. The article had gone on to note the many beneficial aspects of bats in general, and said that, of course, most bats do not carry rabies, and only bats acting strangely should be avoided as potentially lethal. I spent the next several hours wondering if that bat WAS acting strangely—how would I act, being a bat, if I were trapped within my grandfather's house and completely unconcerned with the Republican Convention. I would also wish, often, that I was not the only member of my family to have read about the dead rabid bat-boy. I was certain that bats do not normally frequent inhabited houses, a thought which continued to plague me in the following hours.

I did not, for a variety of reasons, wish to harm that bat. I did wish him removed from my Grandfather's domicile, for both our health and his own. My efforts to empathize with that bat had given me to wonder where I, as a bat, would find sustaining bugs and water indoors, and although bats ARE known for their abilities at hanging from their feet, I could not imagine this particular bat emulating our late cat ("Pottypaws," at such times) or every dog over 18" at the shoulder and drinking from the toilets. Obviously, this was a bat in distress and more in need of understanding and compassion than several sharp blows with my Grandfather's cane, which I did return to him after inquiring if he wished me to run to the basement and fetch his shotgun. He did not. He wished me to evict that bat. I selected the want ads from the Omaha World Herald as my next weapon of choice.

By this time, despairing, it seemed, of bugs and beverage, the bat had returned to the comforting darkness of the stairwell, and I, shouting the inane mantra 'Yo, Bat!' followed slowly in pursuit. Philadelphia obviously had left its mark in more ways than one. I found him no where. He was not under the davenport (not that I looked). He was not in the portable bar. He was, in fact, not in any place that I searched for him, although he must have been somewhere, for no sooner had I sat down next to Grandfather to report my failure than he once again reappeared in the stairwell for a single orbit before returning to his place of refuge in the basement. Grandfather non-verbally encouraged me to renew my efforts.

The World Herald ads and I returned to the basement, and this time my wandering eyes were rewarded with the sight of the bat flitting back to the then-empty apartment of my Grandfather's live-in, who at that time was attending a Jimmy Swaggert missionary revival meeting in some Southern locale. Jimmy Swaggert would greet me, LOUDLY, the Sunday morning after the live-in returned, but at that time no living creature was supposed to be within that part of the basement. I had respected the live-in's privacy, but, ah, had the bat? No.

The bat, befuddled badly, swept through the darkened bedroom and into a storeroom the existence of which I had previously to that moment been absolutely unaware. There he took refuge behind the water heater, a position he soon evacuated as I drew near, still toting the World Herald.

I do not think that this was a vicious bat, but a desperate bat he certainly was. I say he, of course, completely without justification or evidence but one never imagines "The Red Baroness" as one's opponent in an aerial duel, and that is what ensued. Despite my repeated calming and placating utterances (and foggy plan of dropping the World Herald over him and carrying him to safety and freedom), the bat took fright and took wing, knocking me—not for the last time—flat on my posterior as he zoomed over my head and out the door behind me.

Through painful effort and a great deal besides I have acquired considerable knowledge. There was a time when I considered myself a military historian. Was it Alexander the Great, Kitchener's example, or Westmoreland's spectacular failure that reminded me of the classic counter to elusive guerrilla onslaughts? It might have been, but Grandfather had already shut every open door in the upstairs by the time I returned to that level, and I don't know what reminded HIM to do that. I carefully shut the door to the storeroom as I followed the bat outside.

Once again, I found myself sitting unexpectedly as the bat whirred past me at close range. Once again, he failed to crash into a door, but what he did do was remarkably pathetic, for all the undeniable fact that I anthropomorphize. He landed on the carpet directly opposite the closed door, and, after flopping under a nearby chair, lay with his head on the shag staring at his sealed former place of refuge. His drooping little neck (Bats have necks) and wings painted a picture of dejection that drew my sympathy, despite my own two trips to the floor. I found myself once again offering quite useless words and phrases of comfort, as I sought to reassure the tiny creature that I wished him nought but well and a VERY swift return to the bugs and freedom of the Omaha sky. And, as I advanced upon him, yet again with the World Herald, I took my third trip to the floor as he soared up past me, up the stairs, and out and around before my grandfather's hardening eye. I gave chase; I was eluded; he flew down the stairs and despite my precaution of having closed the door to the live-in's room, he was nowhere to be found. A state of siege descended upon my grandfather's house and the three inhabitants thereof.

Some time before dinnertime my mother and Aunt returned to the scene of battle, and each began immediate tasks. My mother dutifully set about calling still more of her local friends, while my Aunt dutifully waited upon her, working over a crossword puzzle in the back of the TV Guide (Omaha edition) while the time passed. Much as I wished to, I could not tell much of what had happened without interrupting my mother's phone conversation, and even Grandfather's reasonably-sympathetic ear was stolen from me by three elderly ladies of the local homeowner's association, who had come to call upon him. I did wonder, as they sat in the kitchen, how the local compact treated the subject of either bats or pets, but my own musing was interrupted as our visitor made yet another sudden bid for freedom.

My mother was remarkably pragmatic as she hunched down in her armchair and calmly told her counterpart on the phone that "You will forgive me if I have to stop talking, but there is a bat flying around over my head." The filtered response was, "Good gracious! Get out of there!" My Aunt, meanwhile, had risen to her feet and was making a variety of suggestions to me, again the de facto bat-basher of the afternoon, as to how to remove the frightened flying fox. She suggested that I call someone—I hazarded such sallies as the BATF, or the Department of Bats, but I did give serious thought to calling the Omaha Zoo, which did have a rather fine collection of Vampire Bats, as I observed firsthand soon thereafter. Since that bat and I had shared at least one night together already in the basement, I admit to relief that THIS was not a vampire bat—but he was continuing his flights.

The occasion called for swift maneuver. I darted PAST the BAT, for a change, and scurried down the stairs, wishing the while for an opportunity to remove my shoes, as was the live-in's custom and request, I found out, for those visiting the lower level. The bat, certainly, was not wearing his own pair of Keds. There I found, to my great joy, sliding doors to seal off the stairwell! With a sense of triumph, these doors I closed, and fell flat YET again as the bat zoomed past me, landed in front of the doors, and with savoir-faire, crawled swiftly beneath them. "Villain!" I shouted, "you shall not escape me!" and gave chase, finding, to my relief, that either the doors were lower or the carpets were higher on the doors within. The bat left me sprawling a final time as he zoomed through the door I had opened to give chase and allowed me to track his progress throughout the upper storey (Rule Britannia!) by the varied screams of my varied female relatives. By this time I was brandishing my grandfather's spare cane in place of the World Herald, having taken up the cane yet again at my Aunt's rather strong suggestion that I do so. As I watched the bat recede into the distance, and rose yet again to my feet, another flash of tactical inspiration seized me. I closed the stairwell doors BEHIND the bat, and waited, on the basement side, in stealthy ambush.

Screams, scratching, and success! A small head soon appeared in the crack between the door and the stairwell carpet, at which I struck repeatedly with the end of the cane. I was NOT, even then, aiming to hit, but it had to be made clear that no bat would pass that door with myself as sentry on guard. And, indeed, the rubber end of the cane seemed to convince the panicked pipistrello that yet another refuge had been denied him, for the head disappeared and the screams upstairs resumed. I charged a final time up the stairs, pausing only, exultantly, to drop my coat into the crack through which my quarry had twice escaped me.

By this time my Aunt's supply of good will toward our visitor had exhausted itself, and she was every bit as adamant as she had been previously that I abandon the cane in favor of a broom. The World Herald, the meanwhile, was performing that edition's final service as my mother sheltered beneath it while continuing her phone conversation. As my Aunt's intentions toward the bat grew rapidly more sanguinary, I did retrieve the broom from the garage, thinking all the while of rabies, and dead boys in Colorado, and the phrase 'Ten Foot Pole.'

As, brandishing the broom (an O-Cedar Angler, somewhat frayed), I returned to final denouement of the struggle, the (sliding) door to the kitchen burst open and I found myself confronting the ladies of the local homeowners' association. Two of them seemed quite content to leave the struggle to those equipped to wage it (or not, as the case was), but the third began loudly asserting that that was NOT a bat. I was not inclined to argue, at that point—he was circling me rather closely at that moment, and I was trying to imagine some gentle way of gently stunning him and carrying him (gently) away from this place that had proved so inhospitable to his little leathery body. The lady then commanded me "Don't kill that little bird!" which did, I admit, almost prompt me towards explaining the various factors that proved, conclusively, 'no bird, but bat.' Between dodges and hesitant swipes I did pause to assert my lack of

hostility toward our little visitor even as my Aunt found a better target for her own sense of outrage and advanced upon the lady from the local homeowner's association. There was a mutual advance and retreat, leaving my mother, the World Herald, the bat, and myself as the final witnesses to the scene.

The bat sought his ultimate place of refuge from the obvious lunatic now marching toward him with an O-Cedar set for (I hoped) 'stun.' He flitted past my mother behind my grandfather's upstairs sofa and, for a moment, hung there; head down. I watched, then, as he seemed to take a breath, then rather deftly reversed himself, and for a moment that seemed an eternity a tiny little head stuck over the edge of the sofa and regarded my mother, the World Herald, and I. I raised the broom—most definitely not in salute.

For every battle there must come an end, a triumph, a tragedy. Rejoice, however, for no bat was bashed, bludgeoned, or beaten that day. He resumed his circling of the living room, but this time, the picture window had thoughtfully been opened, and this time, I think, the glare and brightness of the Omaha afternoon held less terrors for the bat than did the broom-wielding forces within. With what seemed almost, but wasn't, a victory roll, the bat darted sideways through the open door (which I at once closed behind him) to disappear into the haze and humidity of the eastern Nebraska sky.