

Roost

Patrick flew in late last night. Straight into his new life. He'd spent years searching for the perfect home and here it was before him; Foxdale Gatehouse, a wonderful eighteenth-century gothic retreat where he could settle down, thrive, raise a family.

Alan, a mate from his bachelor-pad days, had tipped him off that there was an opening but he'd have to be quick; traditional Cotswold-stone lodges were as rare as golden lacewings.

The place was spectacular with its turrets, arched windows and proper timbered roof space. The country air carried no thrum of traffic, no petrol fumes, no light pollution, just the glow of a million stars. The local fare that awaited him was delicious and abundant – an apparently limitless supply of fresh nutritious food right on his doorstep.

And it was delightfully crowded. Despite the initial jostling and death-metal growls, Rodney, Janet, Dan, Olive and the hundred others accepted him into the fold. He bagged a fabulous spot in a split oak beam away from drafts, protected by the huddle but not too far back that he'd have to queue for ages for the exit hole.

But no one told him about the resident bipeds. He could hear them skittering below; two adults, two juveniles and a pup. A whole family of noisy, disease-ridden, disgusting humans.



Thud-thud-thud. Patrick stretched out a wing, rewrapped it tightly around his body and tried again to sleep. Thud-thud-thud. Drum and bass reverberated through the floorboards. Damn, so that's why this spot had been vacated – it was directly above the juvenile male's bedroom.

Patrick had been lucky with his previous human cohabitee; Doreen Bedlington was a shy solitary female. The juveniles on the estate called her 'the old bat,' although with her blue-rinse hair, floral dresses and quilting obsession, she could not have been less chiropteran.

Doreen didn't join the creepy hordes of humans who streamed from their houses at first light and returned at dusk, having gorged on KFC, McDonalds and whatever other vileness they fed upon. She stayed in with a cup-a-soup and a toasted teacake and listened to local radio. True, his garret in the speciously named 14 Haven Roost had been cold and characterless under the cheap roof-tiles, his view blighted by browning firs and a fog of fluorescent street lights, but you could hear yourself chirrup.

Six-thirty pm. The pup was screaming again, sending a collective shudder through the colony. Patrick licked his fur and waited for twilight. He'd hardly slept all day.

'Psst, newbie, wanna groom under my chin, buddy?'

'Sure.' He'd nothing else to do.

'Cyril,' said his neighbour, exposing his neck wool.

'Patrick. Nice to meet you.' He treated Cyril to a full and thorough bodycure – let's just say he contained multitudes.

'We're heading out to the weir-pool tonight. A great spot if the bloody diurnals haven't cleaned it out. Swifts are a bitch.'

A scattering of pushes and shushes rippled through the huddle.

'Cool,' Patrick whispered. 'Be good to have a break from the humans too.' He could hear them chattering below. They gave him the heebie-jeebies.

'Townies,' hissed Cyril. 'Escape to the country type.'

Cyril's tasty entrées had piqued Patrick's appetite and the final minutes of the day ticked slowly. At last dusk waved its starting flag and the colony shuffled towards the exit hole chirping with excitement.

Go, go, go. He dropped into the night and cast his wings wide, a soft wind billowed his membranes and buoyed him up into –

Aaaaaaah! An ear-rending screech ruined the moment.

Spooky bloody humans.

Patrick echo-located a large adult female running across the lawn, waving her arms madly above her head and shrieking about bats getting caught in her hair. Ridiculous. They had evolved to detect the most minuscule of *Diptera*. Only the most sonar-ily challenged animal could possibly make the gross error of flying into a tangle of human keratin. Patrick followed Cyril's lead; they circled the human, released their urine and flapped into the darkness.



Patrick knew it was bad. Very bad. But he was alive.

It had been his own fault, he'd been giddy with the exhilaration of flying through the dinner-swarms, was high on the thrill of diving under bridges, zig-zagging through the elms, flittering carefree in the moonless night. He'd gorged on a banquet of mosquito, midge and gnat until he was *pterygota*-drunk. Fluttering home ahead of the trailing cloud he was invincible. A superhero of the night. One last victory lap around the garden before roost.

Too low, too bold, too reckless.

The cat pounced.

Patrick lay still and twisted on the lawn. His back – already sodden with moggy saliva – was dotted with early morning dew. A vain attempt to crawl sent daggers through his frazzled body.

Don't panic. Have courage. Try not to die.

Patrick had been chewed and spat out. Thankfully the cat was an amateur. With a huge effort he rolled onto his back and spread his wings to assess the damage: several patches of denuded abdominal fur, three punctures to the left wing-membrane and a badly twisted calcar. Possible internal injury. He was definitely grounded.

Maybe Alan or Cyril or another dawn feeding comrade would spot him on their incoming flight. From above he'd look like a lump of badger poo. His last thought before he passed out.



Patrick trembled beneath a gingham tea towel through which he could detect a trace of dried calfskin and boot polish. He was in a shoebox. Not good but could be worse; it was dark, it was quiet, it was dry. He was alive.

A glaring light hit as the lid opened. Something prodded at his back. Agh, the horror of the human hand. An ugly rounded fingertip poked him again. The lack of inter-digital membranes was macabre. The hand withdrew and reappeared in all its grotesque adiposity, this time it was holding a paintbrush glistening with water. Are you kidding? You'd have to be dying of thirst to drink from that. He was dying of thirst. A plump droplet hit him straight in the eye, damn. He was ready for the next one; he opened wide and swallowed. The pleasure of the cool liquid on his moth-dry tongue was exquisite.

Another drop.

And another.

Thank you, ludicrous human.

A gloved hand gripped him firmly and hauled him into a terrifying whiteness. Low monosyllabic grunts, the smell of aftershave, salt and hairspray; it was the brace of juveniles. One turned him upside-down, stretched out his wings and stabbed at his ears with a cotton bud. The indignity. The other made an attempt to groom him – far too hesitantly – with a soft toothbrush whilst humming *Bat out of Hell*. His humiliation was complete.

Geez, now he was being shoved into a muslin bag and plonked onto the kitchen scales. Oh, good God, he was going to be their dinner. Never trust a flightless mammal. He was not going to die this way; he writhed and squirmed and screamed.

But wait, the conversation was not about food, the adults had pitched up and they were yelling about lice and diseases.

'Get that thing out of here this minute!'

Too right, human viruses were legendary. Patrick didn't want to pick up some dodgy variant.

But the juveniles were pleading their case, bargaining with the promise of antibacterial wipes, handwashing and vacuuming; it sounded like he was staying. Maybe they were going to fatten him up for the barbeque?

Then he was face-to-face with the long-haired juvenile. He was ghastly. The poor thing had no nose-leaf, and the ear good God it was rudimentary; totally lacking a tragus with a pitiful rounded pinna. No wonder they had to play their music so loud. The dentition was flat and square – mercifully not the sort that could crunch through a bat.

Perhaps they were trying to help him after all?

The cradling sensation of being gently lowered back into the box was reassuring. A bottle-top of water and another loaded with brown meaty chunks had appeared. Patrick sniffed the air tentatively. Cat food. Blimey, no thanks.

He slept, he drank, he slept again. It was hard to tell how much time had passed but Patrick felt stronger. His membrane holes were healing, he could crawl without acute pain and his appetite was returning. Even the Katkin turkey and salmon surprise held some allure, actually it was delicious. Eating the cat's food felt like karma.



Patrick joined the family in the living room. The lights had been dimmed, the music turned low and Toodles banished to the east turret. They'd kindly set up a roosting pole in the corner, complete with a range of dangling soft toys from the pup's collection. Patrick squeezed in beside a white rabbit and a yellow bear. It felt nice to be back in a huddle.

Observing the natural behaviour of *homo sapiens* from within their own lair was a revelation. Much of their time was spent looking at small and large screens where other humans danced and sang, dogs rode skateboards, cats played the piano. In the afternoons an

American woman called Judy held court in bat-wing robes and past judgement on lesser beings. Evolution seemed to have taken a strange turn.

There were some human talents that Patrick grew to admire. Having become desensitised to the whole free-finger thing he was starting to find the anthropoid hand rather fascinating. It was surprisingly dexterous. The juvenile female played the flute which produced a rich reedy sound, not unlike the tawny owl. The adult male painted lovely still-lives: bat with fruit, bat with sunflowers, bat at twilight. He really caught Patrick's likeness.

Nights turned to weeks. Patrick could now make short flights around the living room, causing squeals of human delight as he showed off his expert manoeuvring, veering crazily between lamps, diving under chairs, weaving through curtain rails. Even the adult female had softened, she would catapult scraps for him to catch in mid-air and had made him a black velvet tent for daytime repose.

It transpired that humans can communicate over long distances by the use of a non-echolocative device called The Telephone and that on speaker function both parties could magically be heard in the same room. It rang late one afternoon; a Mr Huntington from the council. Patrick listened with increasing dread. The proposed road would separate Foxdale Gatehouse from the river and would run directly below the colony's flightpath to the feeding grounds. It would create noise, pollute the darkness and sully the air. And, complete disaster, necessitate the felling of their major insect-attracting trees. The family were distraught; they stayed up in a huddle long into the night discussing their options but came up with nothing more than objection through the official channels.

Wimps.

One of many things that Patrick had learned from Doreen's radio programmes was that humans loved rules and regulations. Loved the rule of law. Loved planning law in particular.

Bats were anarchists. Bats were protesters. Non-violent direct action was their thing. Patrick crawled along the back of the sofa and hung from the window ledge. He chattered to the adolescent who cranked it open a centimetre. Patrick announced the news loudly into the dawn sky. Word spread throughout the roost.

They knew exactly what to do.

The surveyor stood beneath the ash tree in her high-vis jacket and shone a torch into the heavy branches. They were laden with huddles of chestnut brown bodies. The woman fired off a round of photographs and moved on to the beech tree where comrades hung from every cavity, peered from tree holes and crept from behind loose bark. The ancient oak too was alive with stretching wings and wind-ruffled fur as his friends clambered up cracks and down hollows and poked from the ivy-clad trunk to pose for the camera.

The surveyor removed her hardhat, scratched her head and erected a large yellow sign. Protected Species Roost. Do Not Disturb.



Patrick was sad to leave. The family escorted him outside in his shoebox draped ceremoniously with his velvet tent.

‘We can never thank you enough, little fella.’

‘We’ll be out every night to watch you fly.’

‘Toodles will be locked in at dawn and dusk.’

‘We’ll miss you, mate.’

Patrick could hear his comrades chattering in the eaves, lining up for take-off. The humans lifted the lid and watched as Alan, Cyril, Rodney, Janet, Dan, and Olive dropped into the sky. Patrick circled twice, dipped low over their heads and flew into the night.