

## CONQUERING THE DARK

by Eric Mens

I huddled in the dark at the top of the rickety wooden stairs. Below me, pervasive darkness cloaked the dank basement. The stair light had been switched off at the wall outside the locked door I leaned against. I knew the few basement lights dangling from the floor joists below would provide scant light to assuage my fears even if I could find my way to them in the dark.

For as long as I could remember, the dark had scared me. I was a light sleeper and awoke at the slightest noise. Who knew what dreadful creatures lurked in the darkness? Alone with my thoughts, I recalled a time when I had been startled from a sound sleep by a blood-curdling scream. I was three, maybe four years old.

*Had that been the beginning of my persistent fear?*

My father had not been present much in my early years. Working for the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company in Indonesia, he was often away from home.

As I thought about that night many years ago, the scream reverberated. Covering my ears to silence it, I curled into a fetal position. My heart raced.

The scream had come from beyond our bedroom window bars. With my father away, my sisters and I slept in our mother's large master bedroom suite in separate beds fit for children our age (five, four, and three years old). I was the middle child and the only boy. I scurried to my mother's bed to find comfort. Huddled in her arms, I shivered with fright while my sisters slept in their beds, seemingly undisturbed.

Mother sleepily assured me that we were safe. Quietly, she explained that the iron bars adorning our bedroom windows and the bedroom entrance from the hallway protected us from the animals that prowled at night (she called it a 'tiger'). We listened and watched silently as the large, dark creature growled softly and padded quietly into our line of vision before disappearing from our view and into the hot Javan night.

Shortly after the tiger incident, our lives changed dramatically. Our parents divorced, and Erica and I were given into our father's custody. Younger sister Sheelah stayed with our mother. The separation was traumatic for both Erica and me. The resentment that we felt about the separation from our mother most likely contributed to our rebellious nature and subsequent treatment. We joined a stream of evacuees to start a new life in the Netherlands with a new family and what would be the first of several stepmothers.

Papa treated our malcontent behavior with both physical and emotional abuse. In the Netherlands, considered unfit to join the family on outings outside the home, I would be locked in a closet for hours, sometimes an entire day without sustenance until the family returned.

We immigrated to the US when I was seven. Uprooted once again to live in a new country where we spoke a strange new language, we struggled to find acceptance within our new family. My forced isolation ended briefly when we lived in town. However, soon after moving into a rural farmhouse, I graduated to being locked in a basement. Often, Erica would be locked in her room at the same time. Sometimes, she ran away from home before she could be punished and disappeared for days.

Squirming uncomfortably on the wooden step where I now sat in the dark, I knew that the farmhouse stood apart from nearby homes. It had once been a small chicken farm atop a hill at the end of a paved road. The farm's owner had built a new home and owned an adjoining mink farm across the valley. We maintained the time-worn farm and its remaining small flock of chickens.

My job was to 'candle' the eggs before market; my two stepbrothers supplied the mink farm with a regular supply of small birds they had shot on the property.

Once again, finding myself locked away for an indeterminable amount of time, I swore that *today* would be different from earlier experiences in isolation. A plan was forming in my head.

Sitting breathlessly at the top of the stairs, I drew my knees closer to my chest to protect myself from the ghouls I knew crept along in the darkness below. Given a choice, I would have preferred the cramped quarters of a closet – any closet. There, I was at least safe as I peered through the keyhole, watching the shadows of the outside world lengthen and pass like ghosts flitting in and out of my view.

A sudden loud metal banging emanated from the darkness below, drawing me back into reality. The monster below me was awakening, and I knew that I needed to act to protect myself. Pulling my knees closer, I curled into a tighter fetal position, mind racing.

I recalled that only a small iron rod secured the metal storm door entrance to the cellar. I would need to gather my courage to test whether it would open from the inside. To do so, I would need to descend into the darkness and sneak past the slumbering, fire-breathing monster that lived in the basement. I was convinced the beast would grab me if I ventured too close.

I placed my feet on the stairs and ran my fingers along the wall. It was wet and cool to my touch. I reminded myself to stay close with my back against the wall. The wall would provide more security than the open railing that ran the stairs' length. Venturing too close to the railing made me vulnerable to the clutch of the ghouls that roamed in the dark.

Mouth dry, heart pounding, I slowly eased down the steps, keeping my back against the wall. An eternity passed. The huge black monster sprang to life as if on cue with a loud, mournful, house-shaking shudder and clanking. Through the open stair rail, I saw its red eyes pierce the dark, its dreadful moans calling me. Fire belched through its iron teeth as it mouthed my name.

"*Eerrric, Eerrric,*" it seemed to beckon me to come closer. Terrified, I hurried back up the stairs, out of the monster's line of sight.

The creature fell noisily back into a fitful slumber a short time later. As its loud metallic groans slowly ceased, I resolved to be more purposeful in my movements. Slowly, I descended again. Finally, I felt the uneven dirt floor beneath my feet. Keeping my back to the wall, I prayed nothing would grab me as I moved along more quickly now in the dark. At the far end, I knew there was an entrance to the outside. Yearning to ease my fright, I was determined to reach it.

The monster breathed slowly, intermittently, as I inched along. A faint red glow emanated from the creature, but I was confident I could reach the safety of the door. At long last, I caught a glimpse of light through the inner door. Reaching out, I felt the latch in my hand. I slowly opened the heavy wooden door, peering cautiously over my shoulder, careful not to draw attention to myself.

The door creaked open. Above me, I could see the light filtering through the metal storm door. Emboldened, I drew the inner door wide open. The light was my friend and ally and would protect me from the monster within.

I heaved against the metal door to no avail.

*Before the next time I had to remove the rod,* I told myself,

The sound of tires on the gravel drive warned me it was time to return to the top of the stairs. I quickly groped up the stairs, keeping my back to the wall. At the top, I once again huddled against the door.

When the door finally opened to my freedom, I smiled at my family. I would not let them see me cry. Later, while candling the eggs, I smiled, thinking that I would remove the rod next time

*before* they could lock me up. The small pleasure in my self-assuredness clearly irritated my father. He must have wondered why I was smiling. I quickly humbled myself to keep my father's demons from unleashing their anger on me, keeping my secret close.

*Next time, I will escape.* ■