THE BLESSING
OF THE BEASTS
The Blessing of the Beasts

By Ethel Pochocki

Illustrated by Barry Moser
For the dogs—Emily, Rosie, Moose, and cats—Nora, Dandy, Pansy, Mamacats 1 & 2, Lefty, Beatrice, Josephine, Chester, Teddy, and Vinnie who have blessed my life, and Lucien, Gingerella, Gracie, Leo, Annie, Colette, Poppy, Damien, and Mouse who bless it still
—EP

And for the beautiful beasts that bless my life: Mina, Mehitabel, Murray, Little Mac, Roxanne, and especially my big, sweet IKE.

And in loving memory of Obie and Woody, and especially the memories of Truman and Rosie, my blessed and departed companions.
—BM
Three young uptown roaches.
WORD OF THE

celebration arrived at St. Francis soup kitchen shortly after breakfast by way of three young uptown roaches. They arrived in a crate of discarded supermarket vegetables, hidden within the leaves of wilted lettuce.

They skittered across the floor, carefully avoiding the humans’ sandaled feet, into the woodwork beneath the sink. Once secure behind the drainboard, they danced around their sleeping cousins, crying, “Wake up! We’ve got news!”
The cousins woke, grumpy and annoyed at being disturbed, for they had been up all night. Erasmus, the roach elder of the community, groped for his glasses and demanded in a stern voice to know what was going on.

The uptown roaches fell over themselves gibbering and giggling and interrupting each other. “Wait till you hear — there’s to be a celebration in the cathedral for creatures!”

“What for?” growled Erasmus, scratching his hairy legs.

“It’s for Francis, the good human. They’re having a giant party and everyone’s invited. There’ll be food and music and dancing and people whose pockets we can crawl into.”

“You mean the soup kitchen’s Francis?” asked a young female roach.

“The very one.”
Erasmus, the roach elder of the community.
I was named for him, you know.
“Lovely! I was named for him, you know,” she said proudly. And she told the story of how after she was born, in this very kitchen, her mother called her Francesca, in honor of the human who loved the unlovable. Now there was to be a party for him, and she was invited to it.

“Before you get all worked up,” said Erasmus, yawning, “we won’t be going. The trip’s too dangerous. And even if we made it, do you think they’d let us in? They’d get their spray guns out in a flash and zap us. So you better get on home, boys. Thanks for the invite, but no thanks.”

The young roaches left and the others went to sleep—all except Francesca, who wondered what it would be like inside a church. Her mother had told her there was no reason to visit such a place. Churches were disgustingly clean, barren of food, although sometimes you might find
leftover wedding rice under the pews, and they were dangerous.

She knew personally of one entire roach family tragically wiped out as they nibbled on the hymnals, mercilessly crushed by the cleaning woman. “They went singing into Paradise, just like the martyrs,” sighed her mother.

But this would be different, Francesca thought, as she headed for the alley outside. She would ask Martin about it. He was older and wiser and would know about churches. Martin, who was a skunk, and Francesca had been friends since they met in a trash can a while back. He had startled her by rising from the garbage, wearing a cap of coleslaw and a mustache of yogurt.

“Good evening, Miss,” he said, remembering his manners. “My name is Martin. After the saint,
Good evening, Miss. My name is Martin.
Sometimes they went to the movies and ate popcorn.
Martin de Porres. My mother favored him. His statue was in the garden where we ate, so she named me, her firstborn, after him. And your name is . . . ?"

“Francesca.”

“How elegant. Your grandmother’s name, perhaps?”

Francesca explained about her name and everything else she knew about herself. Martin did the same, and they discovered that they had much in common.

Every night after their first meeting, they met and shared meals and went exploring. Sometimes they went to the movies, where they sat in the balcony and ate popcorn. Sometimes they sat by the lake in the park, feeding Twinkies to the ducks. Sometimes they just sat and pondered life and its mysteries.
Tonight Francesca excitedly shared her news about the celebration with Martin. “And the priest will bless all the animals. Can you imagine? I’ve never been blessed before.”

“Nor have I,” replied Martin smiling, “but I don’t think we are meant to be included, Francesca. It’s for the respectables, the cute and cuddlies.”

“Well,” said Francesca, “I’ll bet there’ll be rats and snakes and porcupines there. We’re as cute as they are.”

“We are outcasts, my dear,” said Martin gently. “They’ll never let us in. Can’t you just hear the humans shrieking as we walk down the aisle? They’d be fainting left and right.”

“We don’t have to go down the aisle,” persisted Francesca, “we could watch from the back of the church.”
We are outcasts, my dear.
Oh, Martin, there’s more to life than garbage.
“And what would we see? Nothing but legs.”
“We could still hear the music and smell the flowers and be part of the excitement. Oh, Martin, there’s more to life than garbage.”
“All right, we’ll go.” Martin shook his head wearily. How could he resist Francesca? “But we’ve got to plan this carefully, logically. Proceed with caution. Now, the ceremony begins at nine AM. We must start at four AM. It’s some distance, you know, from the kitchen to the cathedral. Can you handle it?”
“Can you? All I do is ride along on your tail.”
“Tail might be too dangerous. I think you should settle into my left ear. That way you won’t be blown off.”
“Won’t I make your ear itch?”
“Can’t feel a thing. A car hit me on that side and now the ear just takes up space. You might as well use it.”
And so, as they finished off a crust of asparagus quiche, they planned their journey. Martin knew the shortcuts through parks and subways and playgrounds. By using them, they should arrive at the cathedral about 8:45 AM, if they didn’t run into trouble.

On the morning of October 4, at exactly 4:36 AM (they overslept), Martin, with Francesca aboard, set off at a brisk waddle. “Rejoicing, we go on our way,” laughed Francesca, snuggling into her furry berth.

They had several close calls within the hour. Once, as Martin crossed a street, Francesca leaned over too far and fell out. When Martin stopped to retrieve her, they were almost hit by a yellow cab. Then a boy threw an empty wine bottle at him. Fortunately, his aim was bad, but Martin had to make a long detour around the island of broken glass.