

Ay Caramba Las Cucarachas



By Mort Laitner

As I sat in the Chinese restaurant tasting the last drops of my Lobster Cantonese, the waiter dropped a plate of fortune cookies on the table. I grabbed one and ripped open its wrapping. Securing the cookie between my thumb and forefinger I squeezed. The cookie crumbled into four pieces exposing that sliver of white paper with its inked message. I reached over the plate and pulled the fortune toward my eyes:

THE SMART THING TO DO IS TO PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED.

I thought, “Yeah, right, what a message; what wisdom scrawled on this note.” Confucius modified the Boy Scout motto 2000 years before its birth.

As I left the restaurant, a cold fall night blanketed the city. A solitary street lamp’s glare emitted enough light so that I could make out the red, yellow and orange maple leaves swirling to the ground.

As I hunted for my friend Neil’s two-story Victorian, I was bundled in the uniform du jour, my woolen, navy pea coat and well-worn bell bottoms.

Tired from my adventures in lower Manhattan, I needed a hassle-free place to crash. Neil's invite sounded encouraging.

As I entered the old house, the smell of burning strawberry incense permeated my nostrils. I flicked on the hall lights observing a dozen cockroaches scurrying back under the floorboards.

I shrieked, "Ay caramba los cucarachas!"

Roaches were a serious hang-up.

"This can not be happening," I thought as Neil greeted me with a bear hug and loud, "How you doing buddy?"

"Not bad, how you doing?" I answered.

"You got any Raid?"

Neil replied, "Sorry bro, we ran out weeks ago. The cold weather will kill them in a few days."

I thought to myself, "I'm going to be here for only one night. The less time spent here, the better."

"Neil, lets go to an all-night diner for some coffee, my treat."

He muttered, "Sure Buddy, I got the munchies."

In the diner I pondered, how I was going to sleep in the infestation. The thought of bugs crawling on my lips, creeping into my ears, terrorized me.

I remembered the earwig episode of *Night Gallery* – little bugs tunneling through my brain causing excruciating pain.

On our return to the house, I turned on the black light in the living room, observing a bean bag chair, a day-glow psychedelic poster of Hendrix in a tie-dye shirt fingering his guitar and a worn-out, lumpy sofa, my bed.

Neil turned on his stereo, blasting the Stones, 'Gimme Shelter'.

I belted out the words,

'Gimme shelter from these nocturnal nightmares.'

I followed by yelling, 'Gimme shelter from these vermin.'

I scoured the rest of the room for black six-legged arthropods. Seeing none, I managed to fall asleep.

I dreamed of disease-carrying bugs, covering my body like a black velvet robe. Next, I was transported back to the diner's restroom where I studied myself in the wall mirror. '**No, no!**' I cried as I saw my terrifying reflection. I shook my head frantically as roaches dropped from my hair like dandruff.

I woke shivering yet covered in sweat. I jumped up, throwing off my army-issue blanket and looked out the window. The diner's neon lights blinked,

OPEN 24 HOURS

I thought back to the fortune cookie,

"THE SMART THING TO DO IS TO PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED."

I packed up my belongings, quietly shut the front door and spent the rest of the night sitting in the diner.