

Paradise Worth Fighting For

Written by T. Rob Brown (aka Roberto Chocolate)

Friday, 07 May 2010 13:34 - Last Updated Saturday, 08 May 2010 12:54

I'd finally made it.

After twelve thousand kilometers, 18 border crossings, and a month in a mini-van with my wife and two dogs, I was at last floating in my pool in Panama.

The sound of the near-by Pacific Ocean waves soothed my weary soul, as I sipped white wine and listened to exotic birdcalls and other, less distinguishable, sounds. Truly, this was paradise found – or so I thought.

The first sign of demonic pool possession revealed itself in the form of a tiny scorpion lighting on my shoulder as I reached for my wine. Its stinger poised to kill; I carefully flicked it off my shoulder.

I reported my brush with death to the woman who had sold us our home. She stuttered with amazement. "I have never seen a scorpion in Panama! Are you sure it wasn't an ant or a spider?"

New to this tropical jungle life, I was lulled into a sense of calm that lasted several days, and ended upon my first visit to a Panamanian hardware store and found an entire aisle of products designed to rid your home of scorpions.

Undeterred, I continued to enjoy my pool, with can of scorpion spray at the ready.

I spent many afternoons in my pool admiring the surrounding colorful leaves and flowers. One day I noticed that the bright yellow leaves of my favorite plant were gone. I asked Felix, my gardener, what had happened. His one-word reply, "Hormigas";

I nodded and walked away, pretending to understand.

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I consulted my translator that evening. Ants? Ants had eaten the leaves off a five-foot shrubbery in a single night? I challenged Felix on his assessment the next day. He informed me that these ants only come in the night. I didn't buy it, and I decided that he'd probably forgotten to water the plant and was simply too embarrassed to tell me.

The next day a bright pink bush was stripped bare to its branches.

I consulted the woman who'd sold us the house. She declared that she had never seen plant-eating ants in Panama. I began to suspect that Felix might be right.

That night I sat in the dark, waiting with a flashlight, a bottle of chilled white wine and can of Raid at the ready. I don't recall much about that evening, save for waking up the next morning with a very stiff neck, shocked to find two more of my favorite plants stripped to their bark, and a path that had been chewed from the surrounding grass to the sidewalk.

I followed the path. What I found made my blood run cold. Something had chewed my sidewalk. Can Panamanian ants chew concrete?

I had visions of giant ants feasting on my retirement investment.

How does one go about exorcizing cement-eating ants that attack under the cover of darkness? At night I dreamed of cows being devoured, my bed crawling with imaginary swarms of chewing, chomping ants.

Something had to be done.

I found a professional exterminator in Coronado rumored to have a secret, lethal weapon against these tiny, ravenous nocturnal killers.

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I managed to convey the urgency of my situation in my embarrassing Spanglish, to a lovely young woman at the front desk. She seemed to understand my plight and promised me that someone would be there "mañana," which I took to mean tomorrow. Help, it seemed, was on its way.

Still new to this country, I did not yet understand contractor speak. I since learned, and I share for other newcomers, the following:

When a contractor says they are coming "right now," it means you'll see them sometime in the next few days. When they say they will be there "today," they mean they'll come sometime this week or next. When they say "mañana," they are not coming, ever, but want to avoid the confrontation of telling you something you don't want to hear.

After three more nights and seven more plants stripped bare, I faced the prospect of having to deal with these demons on my own. I donned steel-toed boots, bought an extra can of Raid, new batteries for my flashlight and tip-toed my way over to the last few plants that still had leaves.

I did not have to wait long.

There they were. Their fist line couldn't have been more obvious if they'd sported regimental flags and marching drums. I stood my ground. As the front of the line reached me, I laced them with a double blast of Raid. Beside me, movement caught my eye. I spun around to see that a second line of ants was crawling up another plant. I sprayed that plant until it dripped, unaware that spraying Raid on plants actually kills them. It did not matter: this was war.

I followed the ant trail, blasting at them with both cans, all the way down the sidewalk towards my driveway. Suddenly, the cans hissed air. I panicked. I was not even half way down my driveway, with the stream of ants still marching toward me. I began stomping on them, following their trail out the front gate. I did my best impression of Riverdance, stomping on as many and as fast as I could.

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I finally turned my flashlight down towards the side of the road and froze in horror at what I saw — a two-hundred-yard long line of ants, each with a huge (relative to their size) piece of green or red leaf on their backs, marching in a straight line away from my gate. They passed an equally long line headed towards me.

I stepped into the center of the road and followed the retreating line of ants at a safe distance until I came upon the most sickening sight of my life. The trail ended in a virtual city of red sand mounds, many two or three feet high, all swarming with ants going in and out of huge holes at the top.

There wasn't enough Raid on the planet to conquer these demons and they knew it. I ran back to my house and locked the doors. As I removed my boots, dozens of ants crawled out of my boots and onto my legs.

I stomped them to death and threw the boots outside, securely locking the door behind me. No sleep for me that night.

I considered selling the house, but no one except some a naïve fool from Canada would buy property in an ant-infested jungle. I began keeping my doors locked and rarely ventured out at night. Each day my garden got thinner and thinner.

Finally, I paid my gardener a triple bonus, as I would no longer need him since there were few plants left to tend. He patted me on the shoulder as though he knew what I meant, perhaps, I thought, for the first time.

That very night a stranger strode onto my property, sporting a trench coat a sombrero pintada. It was too dark to see his face under the brim. He pulled a bag from his knapsack and cut off the end with a knife. Nodding as he turned away, this mysterious man disappeared out of my gate and began pouring the powdered contents of the bag onto the ground.

Who was this masked man?

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Turns out it was Felix, my gardener. It also turns out he had been asking me for over a week for money to buy Hormotox, a powder to kill leaf-eating ants. He must have thought me mad, waiting until almost all the plants were eaten before giving him the cash to make the purchase.

At any rate, the Hormotox did the trick. The ants have not returned, and the plants - except for the ones I had killed with Raid - began to sprout new leaves.

Since the ant infestation of 2008, I have learned a lot more Spanish and learned to make sure that I understand what Felix is asking me for, or telling me.

I have also learned that any paradise worth having is worth fighting for - and I intend to enjoy mine to the fullest, while floating in my rebuilt, formerly possessed pool - which I have been told by my contractor will be ready mañana.