

The Roach Busters

By Jamie Buckingham

There was a message on my answering machine. Usually my secretary takes these off, but she was out, so I sat down and played back the tape. The accent was "down-South black," warm and comfortable, the kind I grew up with working with my father's pickers in the Florida citrus groves.

"Mister Buckingham, this is Willie in Baton Rouge. I'd sure like to talk to you." Then he left his number.

My secretary usually returns all calls from people I do not know. But there was something intriguing about this voice, something familiar. On impulse I dialed him back.

I know better than to attempt to imitate Willie Barrow's accent—especially on paper. He's too unique a character for that. But maybe I can impart his spirit.

"I talked to you more than a year ago," he said. "I was in bad shape, depressed, financially strapped. Searching for answers."

Gradually it began to come back. I remembered the warm feeling I had the first time I talked to him, the deep impression that this was a special man of God.

"I'd just read one of your books," he reminded me. "I'd never called an author before, but I was desperate. You listened to me, then you prayed for me over the phone—" His voice broke.

"Ever since that time," he continued, "everything I've touched has turned to gold. I have to pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming, things are so good. I've become vice president of a chemical company. Among other things, we manufacture a remarkable roach spray. It's the finest roach poison ever invented. We're selling millions of cans each month. Last week a U.S. senator called, asking me to come to Washington, D.C., and kill all the roaches in the federal buildings."

"Watch out, Willie," I cautioned, "that could include half the Senate, the majority of the Supreme Court, the administration of the Post Office Department, the entire Small Business Administration—"



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columnist and popular
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"No," he laughed back. "I mean real roaches. The kind that crawl around and spread germs."

Willie Barrow hadn't called me to hear me wisecrack about pork-barrel politics. He had called to genuinely thank me for praying for him—and because he had read in the paper that morning that Florida was having an invasion of roaches.

"That's right," I told him. "We've had killer bees from Brazil coming in from Miami, and now a new breed of roaches, the Asian roach, has come in through the Port of Tampa. They're heading toward the east coast. Fortunately, they stopped over in Lakeland to attend Karl Strader's church and haven't gotten this far yet."

Florida has always had roaches. We have the crawling kind and the flying kind. We also have big things called palmetto bugs, which look like roaches but are twice as wide.

We also have spiders—millions of them of varying sizes and ferocity. Often as my wife, Jackie, and I lie in bed reading before going to sleep at night, she'll leap up, screaming and pointing at one of those huge "leaper" spiders, the size of a hand, crawling across the ceiling. Her screams—as she stands in the middle of the bed pointing—"Get him! Get him!" are a signal for me to wearily get up, plug in the hose to our central vacuum system, sneak up on the spider and suck it into the hose before it leaps into bed with us. It works great, but I

keep wondering what's happening downstairs in that vacuum bag, which one day I'll have to empty. What strange mutations are occurring? Could we be breeding...(shudder)...it's best not to think about it.

Florida also has ants, crickets, mosquitos, lizards, creeping things, crawling things, slithering things, hopping things, things that wiggle up your pants leg, and things that fall off the ceiling and into your lap when you're sitting in your easy chair half asleep watching TV. Once a tiny scorpion fell off the ceiling in the middle of the night and stung my sleeping wife.

But most of all Florida has roaches. Especially this new Asian breed. Unlike the standard Florida roach, which can only fly four or five feet, the Asian model can fly 120 feet—or at least it seems to be that far. Earlier this year a roach count in a field in Lakeland revealed 100,000 to the acre. Roachologist Phil Koehler of the University of Florida says five females and one male can produce 100 tons of roaches per year. Good grief! That's what an aircraft carrier weighs.

"Ever since I read that article I've been praying for you," Willie said. "I told the Lord, 'I've got this friend down in Florida and he's gonna need help. What can I do?'"

"Then the Lord said, 'Give him your gift.' So I'm sending you a case of my roach spray. Just one spraying in your home will kill all roaches up to four months. It's odorless and guaranteed to work overnight."

It arrived the next week. In two days every roach in our house was dead. It really is remarkable stuff. God has blessed Willie's company, and his roach spray can now be purchased in many hardware and grocery stores around the nation.

More important than getting rid of my roaches, however, I've gotten a friend. I've yet to meet Willie Barrow face to face, but he calls occasionally just to bless me and to see if I'm roach-free.

All because I once took the time to pray over the phone for a stranger. ■