

PAYBACK

The cockroach lived his life in darkness and thrived. Ruler of the night. Proud of his glossy, black armour. Awake to opportunity. Feeding on the efforts of others he grew fat and complacent. Until one night he was disturbed by the sound of a man fumbling for a switch. It was not the first time he had been troubled by the midnight ramblings of the man. But this time he was caught in the light.

The man was searching for tablets to ease an intense itchiness he was compelled to scratch. A fiery red rash was spreading over his body. He was worried that in the morning the world would see the shadows under his eyes and be repelled by the skin disorder and other flaws he tried desperately to hide.

The cockroach, temporarily blinded, listened and planned his escape.

The man reached into a cupboard containing the many medicines he depended on to survive. Pills and potions to counteract his chronic insomnia and diseases caused by the effects of stress his doctors warned him of. Not that he trusted them, or anyone else for that matter. Several boxes came crashing down on his head adding to his irritation. Black thoughts returned.

The cockroach -the great survivor, sight restored, raced across the kitchen bench and hid under a knife holder.

The man by now noticing the movement reached for a fly swat on the top of the fridge. He took the presence of the cockroach in the spotless kitchen as a personal affront- a challenge to the ordered world he had created. He resolved to seek out this foul interloper and obliterate it. Quietly approaching the hiding place, he lifted the container and took an angry swipe at the exposed cockroach. He missed.

The cockroach, given a reprieve scampered through a crack in the corner of the wall pursued by a rain of blows born of rage. He watched the man from his refuge.

The man fought back bitter tears of frustration and remorse. Finally swallowing the medicine, he returned to bed but sleep still eluded him. For the first time his position was under threat. His whole life had been devoted to advancement and the acquisition of authority. The Great Leader had styled himself as Everyman, a man of the people and the people taken in by his

cynical and brilliant deception had loved him for it. He had pursued personal ambition at any cost, cleverly disguising his true intentions. He would not surrender power and control without a fight.

He disparagingly called his former deputy Hotshot. With his black shining hair, brooding looks and dark expensive clothing Hotshot was a formidable opponent and a malevolent presence. He was whip smart with a silver tongue. His mercurial talents and ruthless streak, admired and feared in equal measure, had been instrumental to the success of the Great Leader. But now his unbounded ambition had become compelling and toxic. He had become the focus of dissent and the promoter of rebellion. He had traded on his relative youth to sell a vision of vigour and renewal. He had long awaited the opportunity to seize ultimate power and now he was about to strike.

The Great Leader eventually drifted into restless sleep and disturbing dreams. He saw visions of swarming cockroaches - the offspring of the survivor crawling over his body. He woke scratching himself.

Hotshot rose early and prepared for the challenge that he would soon announce. A battle for survival was inevitable. The old man had deceived him and blocked his inexorable ascent but still he retained a grudging admiration and respect. Despite differences in appearance, they were in essence the same. Today he would take his rightful place at the top. It was his time.

He armed himself with his mobile. He prided himself in being informed and ahead. To know in advance what will be. To his horror he discovered that he was for all the wrong reasons the major news story of the day

The Great Leader listened attentively as the story broke. A corruption scandal triggered by a leak from an unnamed source had engulfed his rival. It would ultimately destroy Hotshot but the Great Leader would survive. Refreshed from a cleansing shower and almost free from the rash that had driven him mad in the night he shaved and dressed. He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror -a small, seemingly innocuous, ordinary man wearing glasses and a grey suit.

For the moment the anxiety that constantly plagued him seemed reduced. He almost felt young, almost normal, almost in control. The folksy grin that was his trademark came more easily.

Before facing the media swarming outside he walked deliberately to the kitchen carrying a can of insect killer. He dispassionately sprayed into the gap in the wall.