

LOVE IT OR LEASE IT

By Dave Retseck
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Typically, finding anything edible in your fridge is a good thing when you're in college. There are only so many ways to make a meal out of stale bread sticks, pickle juice and Burger King mustard packs.

But when Heather Sides opened her fridge one fateful September day, she was feeling anything but hungry. A virtual science project of variously mutated food sat moldering on the shelves — a gift from the former tenants.

"It was disgusting," says Sides, a sophomore at Purdue U. "I couldn't believe no one from maintenance bothered to check the refrigerator while they were cleaning the place."

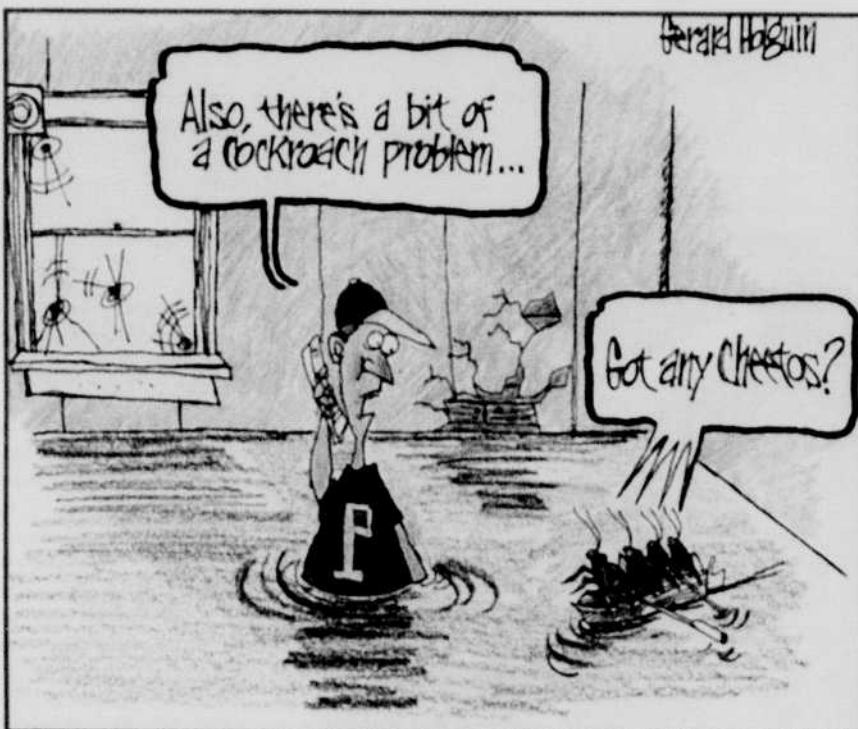
Such incidents are common when students move off campus. The combination of sloppy student lifestyles, fed up landlords and high tenant turnover often results in less-than-ideal living conditions. Management blames students for trashing the properties, students blame management for being unresponsive, and complaints go unaddressed in a blizzard of bad feelings, mutual resentment and loose insulation.

Meanwhile, for Sides, things didn't get much better. In January, a leaky ceiling was gradually turning her carpet into a pleasant little duck pond. In a seemingly reasonable gesture, she called the management.

"When the guy finally did come out to fix it, he made a hole in the ceiling and covered it up with garbage bags," she says. "Insulation was hanging out everywhere. I couldn't believe it."

Ron Dubbel, property manager for Livesay Management — the company from which Sides rented her apartment — says Sides' case was the exception.

"There are always a few [tenants] that slip through the cracks, but it's not intentional," Dubbel says. "We have a three-day turnaround policy during which time our crew will fix the problem. The only exception is an emer-



him to get things done."

Maybe the key is preventive medicine. Alan Grady, a West Lafayette, Ind., consultant who often mediates landlord/tenant disputes, has some advice for prospective renters. "When students walk into their apartment, house or whatever they will be living in, they should check the place out for anything that looks damaged and write it down," he says.

"They should give the list to the landlord and ask him when he would be able to get around to making repairs. Get it in writing, and make them sign to it. Anything in a verbal agreement doesn't mean a thing."

U.'s Official Guide to Avoiding the Shaft

There are several ways to make your rental experience go more smoothly. One is to move back in with Mom. Mom may not want you, though, so it's best to have some back-up plans.

- **Expect an extensive credit check:** If you have bad credit and/or unpaid bills, your property manager may decide you're just not worth the risk. So make peace with your financial past before attempting to rent.

- **Find what utilities are included:** Be wary of low monthly rent. You may have to pay heat, electricity, water or — in rare instances — Jacuzzi and helipad maintenance.

- **Read the lease carefully:** Don't feel pressured to sign right away — make sure you're not obligating yourself to any small print policies. Watch for tricky legalese double talk that can make a sentence mean two *entirely* opposite things, depending on pronunciation.

- **Be prepared to pay a hefty deposit:** Many places require at least two months' rent plus an extra security deposit. Bounce a check or two off the management — they love those kinds of hijinks!

- **Check out the area:** Is it safe? (Hint: If your car is stripped when you come out of the office, the area may not be so hot.)

- **Talk to the current tenants:** Why are they leaving? Any bugs? How's the landlord? Did they strip your car?

gency, such as a water pipe breaking, in which case we will get to correcting the problem immediately."

Nevertheless, Sides has given her friends a warning when dealing with building maintenance. "If a repairman says he'll be back in a couple of minutes, don't let him leave," she grumbles.

But it's a two-way street in Off-CampusVille, and students aren't always the injured parties. Dubbel says that Livesay deals with 15 trashed apartments a year.

"The people who usually live there are seniors who graduate," he says. "They'll throw one last party, leaving kegs, cans

and garbage all over the place — it's difficult to deal with. We'll use a tenant's \$150 security deposit to help pay for costs in cleaning."

Two can play that game. Some students have turned the tables, withholding money from their landlords until repairs are completed. Pat Shipley, a senior at Michigan State U., threatened to put one month's rent in an escrow account until his landlord completed all necessary repairs.

"We thought [the landlord] would be fairly willing or eager to cooperate without a problem," Shipley says. "But we had to keep bugging him and bugging

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