

The Termite Man

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Laura pulled into the driveway. A truck covered with large red insects blocked her parking place. The tires screeched as her car came to a stop.

Laura hopped out of the car. She said, "Sorry I'm late," to the man standing next to the garage.

"Everyone's entitled to five minutes grace," the man said.

Laura couldn't tell if he was angry or not. She had been running at least fifteen minutes behind for months.

He introduced himself and offered his hand.

Laura took it and told him her name and then said, "Pleased to meet you," before letting go.

The dry palm felt confident but the blue eyes avoided any direct contact. Three deep wrinkles laddered up the puffy forehead. An abrupt crewcut stood on top of the last crease.

"I did my diagram while I waited," said the man.

With his feet planted firmly on the ground he turned and picked up a clipboard up off the garden wall. The brown jeans hung low on his hips. A t-shirted roll tipped over his belt.

Laura said, "There're two houses. This one and a small one in the back."

He flashed the clipboard in her direction. The drawing included both buildings and the garage.

"So, how does it look?" Laura said.

The man said, "It's a wood house, and it's old."

Fred had said almost the same words when Laura had argued against having the termite inspection at all.

The man pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "Is there an electric eye?"

"No."

They both moved toward the center of the closed garage.

"Do you have a bad back? I'll get it," Laura said.

He grabbed the handle. "My back's fine," said the termite man. He hoisted the garage door open.

It was cool inside and after the heat of the noon sun, the hairs on the termite man's arms stood up.

He went to work immediately. He flashed his light into the nooks of the exposed framing and searched for dry rot with an ice pick.

Laura hesitated and then said, "I'm going to tag along if you don't mind."

His shoulders tightened. Laura wasn't about to be put off.

As they moved along the walls she tried not to crowd him; her eyes followed the beam of light, not knowing what to see.

Midway down the north side of the garage the termite man turned to her. He worked hard at suppressing a smile. "Want to see what we look for?"

Laura said, "There are termites?"

He backtracked to the back wall and shined his light at a wood intersection. "See," he said. "See?"

He glanced over his shoulder. Laura frowned, looking for signs of life.

"See?" He wiggled the light. "See that?"

"The sawdust?" said Laura.

"Yeah."

Laura felt relieved. No one worried about sawdust.

The man pointed the light into Laura's face. "That's termite droppings, that's what that is." He turned his back on her, went on with his search along the east wall.

The termite man smiled as he walked into the sunlight. He took a Thermos out of the glove compartment of the truck and asked Laura for some sugar.

He put three teaspoons into the coffee and lit a cigarette while he stirred and said, "Do you work?"

"Yes, I'm a doctor."

"A doctor doctor?" he said.

Laura nodded. "Mostly research though," she said.

The termite man blew the stream over the edge of his cup and watched it drift through the air. He looked at Laura. "What kind?" he asked.

"What kind?" Laura said.

He said, "What do you research?"

"Cancer. Cancer research."

The termite man laughed. "Have you figured it out yet?"

"We're working on it."

After tossing half of his coffee onto the ground under the orange tree he stood up and walked over to the truck.

He blew a smoke ring and said, "Thanks for the sugar."

Laura wondered if he enjoyed the coffee as she watched him put on a pair of filthy overalls over his clothes. The termite man ran the zipper up from his crotch to his chin.

"You coming with me into the basement too?" he said. He dropped his cigarette. He mashed it out.

Laura jumped down off the garden wall. "Of course."

At the basement door he undid the latch and pushed. It stuck. Laura came close to his side and kicked the bottom board. She could smell his cologne.

Laura shoved the door open. It scraped to a stop against the hard dirt and Laura stepped back and said, "After you," to the termite man.

He looked at her like a man looking at a woman. "All right, Doctor," the termite man said before he stooped and entered.

After adjusting his knee pads, the man continued the inspection on all fours. Laura followed in a crouch.

Wondering how it measured up to others, Laura said, "It's a nice basement," and felt foolish afterwards.

He tapped his flashlight against one of the cement piers and said, "This is a good little house. Well built."

"My husband and I are buying it. We've rented the place for years."

The warm breeze blowing through the screened vents felt good, smelled of fresh mowed grass and dry lumber. The termite man crawled along the southern perimeter and checked the two by fours resting on the foundation.

After a while he said, "buying a house. . ." and moved the light up the vertical support beams. "You thinking of getting to work on a family too?"

We've been doing that for a while," Laura said into the dark.

The light ran along the floor joists. Back and forth. "My first wife had a hard time that way. Far as I know she never did have a kid."

Something silky broke against Laura's face. She jerked back, bouncing her head against the floor above. "Ouch. Dammit," she said.

The termite man flashed his light in her direction. "You okay?"

She wiped the spider web off her face.

"Be careful," he said, crawling along, on the lookout for termite droppings.

"Do you have children now?" Laura asked.

"Me?" The termite man paused and shook his head. "Never wanted any in the first place."

His belly moved closer to the ground as the basement gradually became a crawl space.

"Why not?" said Laura, now on her knees.

"It just never made sense to me. Who needs them anyway?"

Fred said that, too, when Laura cried with the full moon. Laura couldn't follow any further without getting on her belly, commando style. She sat hunched over and kept her eyes on the beam of light.

Fred accused her of wanting a baby because she dealt in death.

Laura tried to think of herself as dealing in life and she told herself having a baby celebrated living.

But death did nag at her, or it had lately, ever since Joseph. Joseph had been a terminal patient, but he wasn't when he died.

"Kind of a shame to waste all that education, isn't it?" said the voice behind the light.

Laura said, "Waste?"

"You don't have to be a doctor to raise a kid."

"You don't have to be anything to have a child," Laura said.

"No offense, no offense," said the termite man.

Laura said, "No offense taken."

You women, you're so touchy these days."

"Men aren't much better," said Laura.

The light jerked across the floor boards overhead as the termite man wiggled back and forth under them, working his way to the rear of the house.

"You've got a point," he said, using a pier to pull himself forward.

Laura watched the termite man struggle along the north wall, suspecting the space measured less than the eighteen inches required by code.

She said, "Aren't you married now?"

"After four times I gave it up." The termite man chuckled. "I'm back with my second wife."

Laura said, "So you found out number two was the best?"

"She's the only one who'll have me," he said.

"Are you hard to get along with?"

The termite man squirmed his way under the extra bedroom and said, "I used to be."

"And now?" Laura said.

"Once the old peter bone calms down it's easier," said the voice.

It took Laura a second to get it.

"Here we go. Here we go," said the man before Laura could be embarrassed. "I knew the suckers'd be in here somewhere."

Laura said, "Termites?"

He scooted over so that she could see the beam of light dance on the two by fours which held up the extra bedroom. "Right here, a whole slew of them."

Laura stopped looking.

His light found Laura's bent head. He went on, "He went on, "Heylady, don't worry. They aren't in the walls. We don't have to tent the place."

She squinted into the beam of light. "I saw the 60 Minutes about Chlordane," Laura said.

"So did I," he said.

He watched her for a while. he said, "We don't use Chlordane. We treat with Lindane."

Treat, what a lovely euphemism, Laura thought. She said, "I'm an oncologist — a cancer doctor. I'm no fool."

Suddenly the termite man began to zig zag his way toward Laura. "You think I am? Huh?" His back scraped against the floor joists.

"What's wrong? What are you talking about?" Laura asked, trying to back away.

He said, "How do you think guys like me feel? We've been using the stuff for twenty-five years."

He stopped moving as quickly as he had started.

"I'm sorry," she said.

The sweat glistened on his forehead. He rested his chin on the back of his hand. "A few years ago all I ever worried about was having a heart attack way back in a basement like this."

Yeah," Laura said.

"Got so bad I stopped going out in the field." He laughed. "Then when the big news came out I figured, what the hell."

Using his elbows, the man pulled himself forward until there was enough room for his knees to fit under his chest. "I hated being in the office all day, anyway," he said.

He crawled past Laura toward the basement door.

By the time Laua stumbled out into the light the termite man had changed his dirty overalls for a pair of clean ones.

They stood facing one another in the kitchen. The inside of the house and the attic had passed the inspection.

"Two spots. It's not bad for a place this old," said the termite man.

Laura shrugged.

"You have to take care of it or you'll be in big trouble later on," he said.

"Should we do the back house now?" Laura said.

"Why not?" He cleared his throat. "Lady, somehow you've got me feeling bad about all this. You called and asked for the damn inspection."

Laura tried to catch his eye. "It wasn't my idea."

"Well it sure wasn't mine," said the termite man.

"I'll get the key," Laura said.

John, the tenant, had given it to her that morning and she'd left it on the hall table. Laura walked away from the termite man and said, "I'll be right back."

The man was leafing through Fred's gardening book when Laura came back into the kitchen.

He looked over his shoulder at her as he closed the book and put it down. He said "Interesting," and started for the sliding glass door across the room.

"Are you a gardener, too?" Larua said.

I like to putter in the yard, but I don't..."

Laura thought she saw his hand reach for the handle.

"...qualify that as gar..."

The shards of glass fell on him as he walked through the old plate glass window.

The termite man turned. The section of glass sticking into his left shoulder at the base of his neck fell back onto the ground. Blood squirted. Bone showed in the gash on his upper right arm. Red lines widened on his face and hands. He took two steps before falling to his knees. The wound in his thigh gushed blood.

Before calling the ambulance Laura wrapped tourniquets where she could.

She hurried back to the termite man and covered him with a blanket and held his head in her lap and waited.

Laura listened hard for the siren and wondered why she was crying. Joseph dead. The termite man bleeding. Vacant wombs.

She had cultured monoclonal antibodies for Joseph. His cancer had been gone for three weeks. Dr. Stewart called it miraculous.

Joseph had choked to death on a piece of sushi two blocks from the hospital.

Laura laughed through the tears and wondered what happened to the termite man's heart attack.