

LARK and TERMITE

Lark

Winfield, West Virginia

July 26, 1959

I move his chair into the yard under the tree and then Nonie carries him out. The tree is getting all full of seeds and the pods hang down. Soon enough the seeds will fly through the air and Nonie will have hay fever and want all the windows shut to keep the white puffs out. She has on her white uniform to go to work at Charlie's and she holds Termite out from her a ways, not to get her stockings run with his long toenails or her skirt stained with his fingers because he always has jam on them after breakfast.

"There's Termite." Nonie puts him in the chair with his legs under him like he always sits. Anybody else's legs would go to sleep, all day like that. "You keep an eye on him, Lark," Nonie tells me, "and give him some lemonade when it gets warmer. You can put the radio in the kitchen window. That way he can hear it from out here too." Nonie straightens Termite. "Get him one of those cleaner bag ribbons from inside. I got to go, Charlie will have my ass."

A car horn blares in the alley. Termite blares too then, trying to sound like the horn. "Elise is here," Nonie says. "Don't forget to wash the dishes, and wipe off his hands." She's already walking off across the grass, but Termite is outside so he doesn't mind her going. Elise waves at me from inside her Ford. She's a little shape in the shine of glare on the window, then the gravel crunches and they're moving off fast, like they're going somewhere important.

"Termite," I say to him, and he says it back to me. He always gets the notes right, without saying the words. His sounds are like a one-toned song, and the day is still and flat. It's seven in the morning and here and there a little bit of air moves, in pieces, like a tease, like things are getting full so slow no one notices. On the kitchen wall we have one of those glass vials with blue water in it, and the water rises if it's going to storm. The water is all the way to the top and it's like a test now to wait and see if the water works, or if the thing is so cheap it's already broken. "Termite," I tell him, "I'll fix the radio. Don't worry." He's got to have something to listen to. He moves his fingers the way he does, with his hands up and all his fingers pointing, then curving, each in a separate motion, fast or careful. He never looks at his fingers but I always think he hears or knows something through them, like he does it for some

reason. Charlie says he's just spastic, that's a spastic motion; Nonie says he's fidgety, with whatever he has that he can't put to anything. His fingers never stop moving unless we give him something to hold, then he holds on so tight we have to pry whatever it is away from him. Nonie says that's just cussedness. I think when he holds something his fingers rest. He doesn't always want to keep hearing things.

My nightgown is so thin I shouldn't be standing out here, though it's not like it matters. Houses on both sides of the alley have seen about everything of each other from their second floor windows. No one drives back here but the people who live here, who park their cars in the gravel driveways that run off the alley. We don't have a car but the others do, and the Tuccis' have three – two that run and one that doesn't. It's early summer and the alley has a berm of plush grass straight up the center. All us kids – Joey and Solly and Zeke and me – walked the grass barefoot in summer, back and forth to one another's houses. I pulled Termite in the wagon and the wheels fit perfectly in the narrow tire tracks of the alley. Nick Tucci still calls his boys thugs, proud they're quick and tough. He credits Noni with being the only mother his kids really remember, back when we were small.

Today is Sunday. Nick Tucci will run his push mower along the berm from one end to the other, to keep the weeds down. He does it after dusk, when he gets home from weekend overtime at the factory and he's had supper and beer, and the grass smells like one sharp green thread sliced open. I bring Termite out. He loves the sound of that mower and he listens for it, once all the way down, once back. He makes a low murmur like r's strung together and he has to listen hard over the sounds of other things, electric fans in windows, radio sounds, and he sits still and I give him my sandals to hold. He looks to the side like he does, his hands fit into my shoes. His eyes stay still, and he hears. If I stand behind his chair I can feel the blade of the mower too; I feel it roll and turn way down low in me, making a whirl and a cutting.

I tell Termite, "It's not going to rain yet. He'll still mow the alley. There's not going to be stars though, it's going to be hot and white, and the white sky will go gray. Then really late we might have that big storm they talk about."

Big storm they talk about, Termite says back to me, in sounds like my words.

"That's right," I tell him. "But you'll have to watch from the window. Don't think you're going

to sit out here in the rain with lightning flashing all around you.”

He doesn't say anything to that. He might be thinking how great it would be, wind and rain, real hard rain, not like the summer rain we let him sit out in sometimes. He likes motion, he likes things on his skin. He's alive all over that way. Nonie says I put thoughts in his head, he might not be thinking anything. Maybe he doesn't have to think, I tell her. Just don't you be thinking a lot of things about him that aren't true, she'll say.

But no one can tell what's true about him.

Termite was pretty when he was a baby. People would coo over him when we walked him in the big carriage. His forehead was real broad and he had blond curls and those blue eyes that move more than normal, like he's watching something we don't see. I remember when Termite came. Nonie is his guardian and his aunt but I'm his sister. In a way he's more mine than anyone else's. He'll be mine for longer, is what Nonie says. Nonie isn't old but she always says to me about when she's gone. She looks so strong, like a block or a rectangle, strong in her shoulders and her back and her wide hips, even in her legs and their blue veins that she covers up with her stockings. Your mother didn't bring him, is what Nonie told me, someone brought him for her. Not his father. Nonie says Termite's father was only married to my mother for a year. He was a baby, Nonie says, twenty-three when my mother was thirty-five, and those bastards left him over there in Korea. No one even got his body back and they had to have the service around a flag that was folded up. Nonie says it was wrong and it will never be right. But I don't know how Termite got here because Nonie sent me away that week to church camp. I was nine and had my birthday at camp, and when I came home Termite was here. He was nearly a year old but he couldn't sit up by himself, and Nonie had him a baby bed and clothes and a high chair with cushions and straps, and she had papers that were signed. She never got a birth certificate though, so we count the day he came his birthday, but I make him a birthday when it suits me.

“Today could be a birthday,” I tell him. “One with a blue cake, yellow inside and a lemon taste. You like that kind, with whipped cream in the center, to celebrate the storm coming, and Nick

Tucci will get some with his ice tea tonight, and I'll help you put the candles in. You come inside with me while I mix it and you can hold the radio. You can turn the dials around, OK?" Dials around OK. I can almost answer for him. But I don't. And he doesn't, because he doesn't want to come inside. I can feel him holding still; he wants to sit here. He puts his hand up to his face, to his forehead, as though he's holding one of the strips of blue plastic Nonie calls ribbons: that's what he wants. "There's no wind Termite, no air at all," I tell him. He blows with his lips, short sighs.

So I move his chair back from the alley a bit and I go inside and get the ribbon, a strip of a blue plastic cleaner bag about four inches wide and two feet long. It's too small to get tangled and anyway we watch him; I take it out to him and wrap it around his hand twice and he holds it with his fingers curled, up to his forehead. "I'll get dressed and clean up the kitchen," I tell him, "but when I make the cake you're going to have to come inside, OK?"

He casts his eyes sideways at me. That means he agrees but he's thinking about the blue, that strip of space he can move.

"You ring the bell if you want anything," I say.

The bell on his chair was my idea; it's really a bell for a hotel desk, flat, and he can press the knob with his wrist.

"Termite," I tell him, "I'm going back in."

Back in, back in, back in. I hear him as I walk away, and now he'll be silent as a breather, quiet as long as I let him be.

I stand at the kitchen sink where I can see him, put the stopper in the sink, run the water as hot as it can get. The smell of the heat comes up at my face. The dishes sink into suds and I watch Termite. His chair is turned a little to the side, and I can see him blowing on the ribbon, blowing and blowing it, not too fast. The little bit of air that stirs in the yard catches the length of that scrap and moves it. Termite likes the blue of the plastic and he likes to see through it. He blows it out from his face and he watches it move, and it barely touches him, and he blows it away. He'll do that for thirty minutes, for an hour, till you take it away from him. In my dreams he does it for days, for years, like he's keeping time, like he's a clock or a watch. I draw him that way, fast, with a pencil in my notebook. Head up like he holds himself then, wrist

raised, moving blue with his breath.

People who see him from their second-story windows see a boy in a chair across the alley. They know his name and who he is. They know Noreen and how she's worked at Charlie Fitzgibbon's all these years, running the restaurant with Charlie while Gladdy Fitzgibbon owns it all and parcels out the money. How Nonie is raising kids alone that aren't hers because Charlie has never told his mother to shove it, never walked off and made himself some other work and gone ahead and married a twice-divorced woman with a daughter and another kid who can't walk and doesn't talk.

Nonie is like my mother. When she introduces me, she says, "This is my daughter, Lark."

Nonie can do about anything, but she says she doesn't do what makes money in this world.

Dishwashing doesn't make money but I like it at home when I'm alone. I'm so used to being with Termite, he feels like alone to me. He's like a hum that always hums so the edge of where I am is blunt and softened. And when I push the dishes under I don't even look at them; I keep my eyes on him, out the window. He moves that clear blue ribbon with his breath, ripples it slow in front of his eyes, lips pursed. Pulls air out of air in such still heat. Sees through blue, if he sees. Or just feels it touching him, then flying out. I can hear the air at his open lips. I hear the air conditioner down at the restaurant too. Nonie is taking orders in the breakfast rush and it's already crowded and hot, tables and stools at the counter filled. Charlie wanted me to take the dinner shift after I graduated, but Nonie said I wasn't graduating high school to be a seventeen-year-old waitress. She says I don't need a job. Termite's my job, and Barker Secretarial, when she can be home nights to stay with Termite. The point is to make things better, Nonie says, have a future. I'm looking at Termite and the alley past his chair, and it's funny how that piece of see-through blue he holds to his face looks how I think a future would, waving like that, moving start to finish, leading off into space.

Termite

He sees through the blue and it goes away, he sees through the blue and it goes away again. He breathes, blowing just high. The blue moves but not too much, the blue moves and stays

blue and moves. He can see into the sky where there are no shapes. The shapes that move around him are big, colliding and joining and going apart. They're the warm feel of what he hears and smells next to him, of those who hold and move and touch and lift him, saying these curls get so tangled, wipe off his hands, Lark, there's Termite. He sings back to keep them away or draw them near. That's all he'll say, he won't tell and tell. Lark bends over him and her hair falls along his neck and shoulders, her hair moves and breathes over his back and chest in a dark curtain that falls and falls. Her hair smells of flowers that have dried, like the handful of rose petals he grasped until they were soft and damp. Lark names the flowers and he says the sounds but the sounds are not the flowers. The flower is the shape so close he sees it still enough to look, blue like that, long and tall, each flared tongue with its own dark eye. Then the shape moves and the flower is too close or too far. The shape becomes its colors but he feels Lark touch it to his face and lips like a weightless velvet scrap. The flower moves and blurs and smears, he looks away to stop it disappearing. Pictures that touch him move and change, they lift and turn, stutter their edges and blur one into another. The colors fall apart and are never still long enough for him to see, but the pictures inside him hold still. Their gray shades are sharp and clear and let him see, flat as the pages of books Lark holds near his eyes. He sees them without trying. It's how Lark sees everything, everywhere they go. She couldn't walk and run so fast and be so sure through his moving colors, his dark that blurs. But she can't hear what he hears. He listens hard to tell. She never knows what's coming but he can't say and say.

Lark says feel your soft blue shirt want to wear this? She says you're nine years old now, hold the crayon it's green as grass is green. She says listen to the radio even if it's not so loud as you like. She says eat your toast while it's hot and she gives him toast, thick and warm and buttery in his hand with the blue jam on the knife like the farmer's wife. The knife comes and goes across the plates. The table holds the pouring and crashing and banging while Nonie walks hard and fast in and out of the kitchen in her white shoes. Her legs swish every step and he can feel her stepping room to room to room. No matter where she is he can hear and he puts his head on the table to hear the sound alone through the wood without all the other sounds. But she picks him up, one strong arm around his chest and the other bent for the seat under him she calls his throne. They move fast, thudding across the floor out the door onto the ground where the sound goes hollow and deep. The porch door bangs.

Sudden morning air floats low to the ground amidst the small houses like fragrant

evaporating mist, a cool bath of dew and shadow and damp honeysuckle scent. He gasps and hears the sharp grass under them move its fibrous roots. Lark has brought his chair but he leans far back in Nonie's arms to look and look into the dense white sky. Heat will climb down in wisps and drifts, losing itself in pieces until it falls in gathered folds, pressing and pressing to hold the river still. Far up the heat turns and moves like a big animal trying to rouse. All the while he can hear Elise's car roll its big wheels closer until it turns roaring into the alley, but Nonie puts him in his chair. She brushes his hair back with her two broad hands while the car throbs in the narrow tracks of the alley, crushing gravel to rattles and slides and bleating loud. He calls and calls and he wants to go but Nonie goes. Under the motor sound he hears the car take her weight, a sigh before the door slams. The car roars away down the stones onto the smooth pavement and goes until it's gone. There's a shape in the air where the car was. He feels the shape hold still before it begins to end. Slowly the air comes back. The grass begins small sounds.

Termite, Lark says. I'll fix the radio. Don't worry.

Lark's fingers are long and smooth. They come and go.

Here's your ribbon, Lark says.

She wraps the blue around his wrist. He moves it to his face, just above his eyes where the eyes have looked, but he doesn't look.

Mow the grass, Lark says. Big storm they talk about.

He waits. Soon she'll go.

She says, don't think you're going to sit out here in the rain with lightning flashing all around you.

He holds still, listening. Far down the alley where the gravel meets the street, he hears the orange cat paw forward on its ragged paws. Away down the alley across from Tuccis' house the ragged orange cat is stepping careful, dragging its belly along the stones under the lilacs. The cat waits then for Lark to go. The cat waits low and long where no one sees and the growl in its belly thrums deeper. The cat knows Lark will throw a stick or a handful of gravel that lands like stinging rain.

Termite, Lark says.

She puts her face close to his, her eyes against his eyes. Lark's brown eyes are stirred like the river when the river is milky with rain. She knows he can see if she's very close but he doesn't look now, he doesn't try, he doesn't want her to stay.

She says, you ring the bell if you want anything.

He wants to hear the train. Far off the train's bell sound is long and wide and dark as the shade under the railroad bridge. The bridge goes over the river and the trains pour over top.

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