

HED: Dawn of the Roaches

SUB: The blood-curdling, horrific, true-life details of what I found under my new Dream House.

By Amanda Tackett

Nick the Exterminator climbed out of the hatch that leads to the crawl space under my house. He was wearing coveralls over his uniform. “Ma’am, you got the single largest residential roach infestation I’ve ever seen,” he said, “and I been doin’ this a *long* time. And I spray a bunch of them apartments over on Fitzhugh.”

Let me pause for a moment to state emphatically that I am not the kind of person who has roaches, and these weren’t *my* roaches. They belonged to the previous owner.

Where I grew up in Richardson, the pattern of homes repeated every fifth house. But just across Arapaho Road lay a magical area with real architecture and trees—huge trees, climbing trees. There was one house, square, kind of French looking. At least a dozen times a week, I passed by the house while perched expectantly on the perforated white vinyl seats of my mother’s harvest gold 1973 Impala. “I’m going to live in that house one day!” I told my mother. Her response: “When pigs fly.” She wasn’t being mean. She was being realistic. I would never be able to afford that house.

Guess what, Mom? The pigs are cleared for takeoff. That man of mine, the Trophy Husband, bought my Dream House for me. But from the beginning, there were issues.

“Look here,” Nick the Exterminator said. “I got some samples for you to look at.” Oh, this was going to be super fun! *I love samples*, like at the farmers market, or those cute little fabric swatches. He produced a jar. “This specimen here is your good ol’-fashioned all-American cock-a-roach.” I appreciated the way he added the extra syllable. Holding another container to the light so I could see the nasty insect, he said, “And this one here is real common. They like trees and water. And this little pad’ner,” he said, removing it from the jar, “is an Asian cock-a-roach. Aren’t you? Yes, you are.” He talked *to* the roach in the same baby-talk way I address my dog. The roach looked at me, antennae flexing, its arms, legs, or whatever, punching the air. It looked like it wanted to spar. Up till that moment, I never knew roaches could make an audible noise. I jumped back. “Them

Asians are real *feisty*,” Nick said.

“How bad is it?” I asked.

Basically, he said I had Dallas, Fort Worth, and all the suburbs stuck together, in a little roach city under my house.

Nick the Exterminator explained the various packages available to treat my Dream House. I only half-listened. A *roach city* under my new home. Imagine that. Roach Dallas, with a little roach Addison where all the roaches go to eat. A roach Plano where the roaches live and commute to corporate campuses in roach Frisco. A little gay enclave of roaches north of roach downtown. Wealthy roaches live in the roach bubble, where the baby roaches go to better schools. Hardworking, salt-of-the-earth roaches lived in roach Garland and roach Mesquite. I realized Nick the Exterminator had stopped speaking awhile ago.

“Ma’am, did you hear me? You need to vacate these premises.” I stood in my Dream House, numb, unable to respond. “Girl,” he said, “*I am about to light this place up.*”

My belongings were scattered. Where were my keys, and what about the workers who were laying the new floors? In broken Spanish, I said, “*Mucho cucarachas,*” while busting out my best charade moves to demonstrate. “Si,” they enthusiastically agreed with me, I had lots of roaches. “No, *mucho cucarachas y muy morte,*” I said, making a choking gesture. They shrugged and kept hammering planks. I would just have to abandon them in the wake of Nick’s death dust.

The doorbell rang, and standing before me was Mike the Landscaper. I explained the roach problem, and he said, “That’s nuthin’. My wife had a house in East Dallas before we got married, and it had a bunch of roaches one time, so I set off those bomb things, and it was *weird*. I had to wait on the porch for 20 minutes, and you could see a wave of dark passing through the grass as they went through the yard.” That was the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard, a *visible wave of roaches*. Like that could really happen.

I had to cut short my discussion with Mike the Landscaper, because, at that moment, I realized I really had to pee. As I entered the powder room tucked beneath the stairs, Nick the Exterminator, headed back under the house, said, “I’m not jokin’, girl. You need to VA-MAN-NOS.” Great, now he was mocking my Spanish, too. I was sitting on the toilet when Nick apparently started “treatin’” and “sprayin’.” The wires beneath the old house must have shorted due to all the work being

done. Trapped in the tiny bathroom, lights out, momentary panic. And then the lights came alive again.

To my horror, cock-a-roaches were scurrying on the walls, out of the ventilation fan, and from behind the electric switch plate. “*Ohmigosh,*” I said, looking upward to the ceiling. The now twitching and seizing roaches were having difficulty as they squeezed out of the can light. I saw it coming.

The roaches began to fall—in my hair, down my shirt. I let out a shriek and flung the door open. Doing a jig, slapping myself, I was surrounded. Roaches were literally crawling out of the woodwork. From behind paneling, out of the seams of crown molding, electrical plugs, dropping from the fireplace, an exodus from the air vents, hundreds pouring out everywhere. Again, they struggled on the ceiling. Plunk, plunk, plunk—more roaches in my hair, clambering across my arms and back, it was *exactly* like a horror movie. As I fled the Dream House, I saw a wave of dark flowing across the lawn.

Wiping away tears, I decided there was only one course of action: to retreat to the neighborhood nail salon for a pedicure. I couldn’t shake the creepy skin feeling, but French toes *might* help. There, sitting in the spa chair, I was being pounded, shaken, and vibrated when my husband called. “Honey,” I whispered, cupping my mouth over the cell phone, “we have a major infestation.”

“*Infection?*” he asked. “Where? Is this a *female* thing? Don’t answer that. Just go to the doctor.”

“No!” I said, raising my voice over the hum of the chair and the whooshing of the Jacuzzi jets. “WE HAVE A MAJOR FREAKING ROACH INFESTATION!” Heads turned and eyes drilled toward me. Ladies who lunch, serious corporate types, teenage fashion victims, my at-home sisterhood—all of them glared at me like I was a leper. Even the once accommodating salon staff turned cold and distant.

Left to myself, I just kept thinking about that wave of roaches. Where *did* they go? To my new neighbors’ houses? Was I supposed to knock on their doors? “Hi, I’m your new roach-infested neighbor, and in the process of eradicating the colony in my Dream House, I think I may have inadvertently sent some your way. Don’t worry, though. I think you got roach Preston Hollow.”

No, that wouldn’t work. I hung my head in shame and did my most graceful post-pedicure duck walk out of there in my dis-

posable flip-flops.

I returned hours later to the Dream House to survey the carnage. I couldn't find the light switch, and upon entering, my foot made a crispy landing in the hall. I found the switch. Now fully illuminated, every surface—floors, counters, sinks, stairs, shelves, cabinets, in every room, upstairs and down—was covered in dead or dying roaches. I retrieved my giant standup dustpan and began to scoop, for hours. Nick's math was, unfortunately, accurate. Several Hefty bags later, I was done.

I used to see a therapist, until she asked me to stop talking about the roaches because she said it made her uncomfortable. Now I don't need the therapist anymore. I have a new kind of therapy: Nick and Mike. Nick the Exterminator has dropped by often this past year, every few weeks for "treatin'" and "sprayin'." Mike the Landscaper, he's here, too. They tell stories, listen to mine, offer advice. "Girl, that is some seriously UG-LY wallpaper," Nick will tell me. "It'll all work out," Mike says.

Best of all, they don't judge or get the wil-lies when I have to talk about the dark wave.

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