

The Season of the Itch

There are times, even now, when I swear I can still feel the things. I used to enjoy the spring much more, the unclenching of winter, the waves of balmy air, open windows, the promise of baseball games and taking the kids to the pool. I still love that stuff, but there is also this anxiety—the psychosomatic sensation of tiny insect legs traversing the skin of my bare feet and ankles, imaginary microscopic pincers plunging into my flesh.

In the spring of 2009, my two kids and I had been in our townhouse about two and a half years. We took the keys in October of 2006, just a few days after our St. Louis Cardinals beat the Tigers in the World Series, almost exactly a year from the break-up of my marriage. In the interim, we lived for a year with my father at his six-acre spread in rural St. Charles County in the house where I grew up. My daughter, Laura, was 10 when the divorce was finalized; Nick was only 3.

The townhouse was, at last, our place.

By that spring in 2009, we could walk through the rooms in the dark without bumping into anything and it was *home* for all of us, including our two cats. We adopted Martin in August of '08, eight months after we lost our beloved 15-year-old grey and white tabby, Bianca, to feline breast cancer. She had been small, shy, and withdrawn, hiding under a bed or in a closet when visitors came to the house.

Martin was enormous, black, and gregarious, too smart to fall for the laser pointer, a lovable alley punk turned domestic. Even in his now comfortable life, it was clear he never forgot his time on the street, getting rained on, freezing in the winter, having to fight for his meals.

“Yeah, I’ll play with you, but I’m gonna have my claws out.”

We liked him immediately. The lady at the shelter cried when we took him. No one else had wanted him—too big, not cute enough.

We adopted Josie the following Thanksgiving, a playmate for Martin. A diminutive gray and brown tabby, she had been dubbed Yoga Cat by the shelter for her habit of lying with her legs stretched out behind her like a

cat rug. She also lived a rich fantasy life, spending her evenings chasing imaginary mice, and more than once I have been awakened in the middle of the night to the sound of her crashing into the wall of my bedroom as she lunged after the high beams of passing cars.

Just as most great conflicts have started small—the shot heard ‘round the world, Fort Sumpter, the assassination of the archduke—so it was for that summer of our discontent. It was a Saturday, and I was reading the newspaper on the couch when I felt an insect bite on my right forearm. I looked down expecting to see a mosquito and instead saw—nothing, just a small black dot, like a freckle. As I contemplated the dot, it disappeared.

I had some experience with fleas as a kid on the six-acre spread—a summer in which our cat or dog had brought them into the house. We spent weeks trying one cockeyed scheme after another: flea collars in the vacuum cleaner bags, sticky pads to ensnare them like tar pits, and bowls of water under nightlights, into which the fleas were supposed to leap like lemmings in mass suicide while we slept.

Ultimately, weeks into the infestation, we went to the “nuclear option”—cans of fogger that killed the invaders like a neutron bomb, leaving our home standing and flea-free once and for all.

The thing on my arm could not have been a flea, however. Neither cat went outside. How, then, could the things get in? Armed with such ironclad logic, I did nothing, until before long, we were catching multiple fleas a day as they crawled and jumped on us, and Martin in particular was scratching away his fur around his shoulders, leaving bloody, symmetrical bald spots.

Some time later, the answer presented itself when, driving past my front door on the way to work, I noticed one of the neighborhood strays lounging on the welcome mat. I imagined some of the little vermin staying behind in the bristles of the mat after the cat got up and then leaping onto my pants as I returned from the mailbox. The welcome mat—ironic. I had unwittingly “welcomed” the blood-sucking hoard directly into my home.

Martin was the first to the vet, who seemed to me very qualified but looked to be around 14 years old. Using a flea comb, he confirmed the infestation with the discovery of flea excrement, essentially the cat’s own

digested and congealed blood, in Martin's fur. The vet prescribed a topical product that is applied to the skin between the animal's shoulder blades, where it then spreads over the surface of the skin and kills any flea that bites the cat.

"The fleas must feed to live," he said, scratching at a zit on his chin. "You take away their food source and you'll get the infestation under control."

This sounded great, except that's not what happened. Here are some things that I learned during the few weeks I was waiting for the topical flea killer to do its thing:

- One adult flea can lay up to 50 eggs a day.
- A flea generally lives 100 days, unless it is stupid enough to bite a cat treated with topical flea killer.
- Fleas can live up to two months without biting anything.
- They do not make topical flea killer for human beings.
- If I were a flea, I would be able to jump the length of three football fields in one bound without taking a run at it or, if you prefer, straight up, one and a half times the height of the Gateway Arch.
- Given the available data, during the weeks I indulged in denial and the subsequent weeks waiting for the flea killer to work, I estimated the fleas had established a community in our home roughly equivalent to the human population of New Zealand.

In addition to the real ones, we also experienced itching from no visible source whatsoever, even when we were out of the house, away from the biting throng. They had got into my head and the heads of my children and loved ones; our imaginations had been infiltrated.

Complicating all of this was that three months earlier I had entered into a promising new relationship with a wonderful woman named Jennifer, a psychiatrist with red-brown hair, an off-beat sense of humor, and a love of books and reading that extended to moments like her teeth brushing, the commercial breaks during TV shows, and the intermissions at live music and theatrical performances.

While things had been going very well between us, I was convinced that the flea infestation was the thing I had been dreading that would kill our new relationship. I imagined her telling her friends about me.

“Yes, he’s very nice, though his house *is* overrun with vermin.”

It seemed inevitable she would leave me, after which Laura and Nick would ask to be relieved of their two weeknights and alternating weekends with me as well.

It was time for the nuclear option.

On a sunny Saturday morning we gathered up Martin and Josie and distributed cans of flea fogger throughout the house. Like a demolitions expert planting charges on an enemy’s suspension bridge, I placed them strategically and then activated them one by one as I made my way toward the door.

I closed the front door, the cans hissing behind it in deadly harmony. Beneath the hissing, I could almost detect the sound of millions of microscopic voices screaming.

After the prescribed three hours, we returned and I carefully collected and discarded the empty fogger cans, opened the windows and gave the place a good vacuuming. I thought I might see some evidence of the fleas’ mass demise, maybe the words “You win” spelled out on the living room floor with the dead bodies, but the place looked the same as it always did. The afternoon was blissfully itch-free as we moved about our reclaimed house; they would rue the day they messed with us, yes sir.

That evening, Laura, Jennifer, and I sat in front of the TV playing a game of Tetris while Nick watched, cheering us all on simultaneously. I felt an itch on my bare left foot.

“Imaginary flea,” I thought. “I guess it will take a little while for those to go away.”

I looked down at the foot and saw a familiar black dot, which then disappeared and reappeared a moment later on my shin. I hung my head and, for a moment I am not proud of, contemplated arson as a viable solution to this problem.

In the month and a half that followed, I fogged the house three more times and my vacuuming increased in frequency until I was sucking the dirt and (I hoped) fleas on a semi-hourly basis from the carpets, curtains, linoleum, fireplace hearth, floor registers and cold air return vents, window

sills, bathroom vanities, kitchen counter, stairway banisters, tabletops, basement, and garage. I obsessively washed our sheets and blankets, vacuuming the bare mattresses while they rhythmically swirled in the Maytag downstairs.

Jennifer and the kids noticed a change in my demeanor—I had grown irritable, spending hours online searching out strategies to destroy the aliens. I was Ahab, and my Moby Dick was scattered about the house, not one imposing white whale but a ubiquitous, indestructible force hell bent on sucking every last drop of blood from our withered bodies.

There were a couple bright spots. Instead of leaving me, Jennifer leapt into the fray with me, helping me flea comb the cats every time she was over, one of us holding the cat in question while the other combed the struggling creature, removing dozens of fleas in each session, which we drowned in a bowl of soapy water as we went. It was temporary relief for the cats at best, as the drowned fleas' extended family members waited to leap into the places recently vacated, but at least it felt like we were doing something.

Still, the cats grew despondent. Martin especially just lay in the same spot against the kitchen wall all day, occasionally jumping up onto the table, probably because there were no fleas up there.

In August, near the point at which I was preparing to call an exterminator and hand over my savings to eradicate the pests, I was at the vet with Josie for her check-up and updated him on the flea situation. He told me fogging usually worked.

“Maybe your fleas are resistant to the poisons,” he said.

My fleas.

Yes, that is what they had become. I expected him to suggest I begin naming them, but instead, he said something that changed our lives.

“There is a pill available now,” he began. “It will kill all the fleas on the cat in a half hour, whether they bite it or not. The downside is that it only works for 24 hours.”

“Give it to me,” I said, immediately.

Later that day, Jennifer helped me to force feed the pills to Martin and Josie, after which we went out for a bit. When we returned Martin was in his spot on the kitchen table, surrounded by the bodies of more than 50 dead and dying fleas. He had an oddly satisfied look on his face. There is

no way to tell how many fleas died that day as Josie and Martin roamed about the house—a pair of furry, roving bug zappers—but it was then that the tide of our private war began to turn.

Abandoning the bombs, I switched to a potent flea-killing spray, with which I repeatedly treated their favorite hiding places: the dark corners of the pantry and behind the couch and the nooks and crannies of the basement. Over the remainder of the summer, our flea combing sessions turned up fewer numbers, then single digits, then none, again, and again, and again. We had won.

Each springtime since then, I've braced myself for their return, but they've stayed away. Jennifer, on the other hand, has stuck around, and together we have endured additional trials: stomach flu, monsoons, and my casual disregard for food in the refrigerator that is well past the expiration date. I've stopped dreading the breaking point in our relationship, but as with the fleas, and for reasons that have nothing to do her, I don't think I'll ever be able to relax entirely.

Nick and Laura, of course, have changed the most. Just a little kid back then, Nick is now 10 and preparing for fifth grade while Laura lurches through adolescence, traveling that shaky landscape we have all walked—not a child anymore, not quite an adult. I'm pretty sure she'd prefer if I kept my mouth shut around her friends, and between her fast food job, her choirs, and her musical theatre productions, I don't see her nearly as much as I used to, and I can't recall the last time we all sat down and played Tetris together.

I like to imagine an evening, maybe a dozen or so years from now. We'll all be gathered at someone's house for a barbecue on the first warm weekend of the spring. Nick is a young man, and Laura, perhaps, has a family of her own. The grill sputters and pops, and the lawn chairs press their patterns into the backs of our legs as we sit, sip cool drinks, and talk—fireflies beginning to appear in the yard.

Someone's dog starts scratching frantically on the patio; one of us makes a comment about getting him checked for fleas, and Laura says, "Hey, Dad. Do you remember that time?"

We all laugh and tell the story again, and together, we remember.