



TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT

by Jim Stiles

ITCHING--- A PERSONAL HISTORY.

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"I don't like the itching, but I don't mind the scratching."

Late Night with David Letterman---1988

Every year, in early March, I begin to long for Spring. After yet another cold grey winter, I'm ready for the return of warm afternoons and longer days, and open windows, and the leafing out, and budding out, and flowering out of all living entities that naturally do that kind of thing. It makes me feel like celebrating.

In most respects my enthusiasm for the warmer part of the years stays with me. But one aspect of summer drives me to the brink of madness, and now, I'm praying for bitter cold temperatures and an early winter. Here's where I also must admit a certain hostility toward my wife.

Before I met Tonya, I had decided I would never run the risk of becoming involved with a white woman again. A lifetime of unsuccessful relationships with Caucasian women had brought me nothing but heartache. Though I admit skin color may have had nothing to do with it, I decided that in the future, if I dated anyone, I would only approach women of Asian or African descent. Then along came Miss T, about the whitest white woman I have ever met—a woman so fair, one might even call her pale (I tried to write 'pasty' but she deleted it.)

There is a point to this meandering tale and I am getting there. You see, summer brings many kinds of joys and pleasures and Tonya appreciates all of them. For most of us, summer also brings certain hardships and difficulties, but these don't bother her. You see, while T may have the fairest of skin, her epidermal regions are, incredibly, impervious to the attacks of insects. Nothing gets to her. She is immune to the stings and nibbles and sucking and chomping of these damnable creatures.

I, on the other hand, a man toughened by decades outside and with a genetic predisposition for darker, 'olive' skin, am nonetheless a damn pin cushion, a plasma bank, an unprotected reservoir of flesh and blood for any insect, of any variety, to make a meal out of. How I suffer.

And the itching. The welts. The furious scratching. In fact, our relationship began while I suffered through such a miserable state...

Just a month or so before Tonya and I got together, I was in the last throes of my ill-fated Australian adventure. One afternoon, as the temperature hov-



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ered around 105 F, I was sitting in my old Datsun pickup, futilely trying to catch a breeze off the Bunbury Estuary. I noticed a tiny black speck on my bare sun-baked leg. It was moving.

Concerned but not alarmed, I pinched the little creepy critter between my fingers and flicked it out the window. But a few moments later, I eyed another one. And another. Then they began creeping up both legs. Soon I was doing nothing but studying my legs, waiting for the next intruder. They kept coming.

Wondering what these mini-invaders looked like, I retrieved a magnifying glass, put one of the little bastards in the palm of my hand and had a gaze. It looked hideous, like a miniature tick and still alive and I could see his legs trying to gain traction on my skin. I thought that I had most likely walked through a swarm of sand fleas, but then I began to wonder if Australia had chiggers, as they do in

Kentucky. The Fear swept through me---- I had been down that road before and I knew I needed to get these creatures off my body as quickly as possible.

But I was camped out, in the middle of nowhere, with no running water, so I did the best I could with my solar shower. After I dried, I located my can of insect repellent and sprayed my legs with enough poison to make the skin turn color. I didn't care anymore. Even after the soap and water, they kept coming, from where I couldn't say. And despite my best efforts, I spotted more of them advancing farther up my leg.

Suddenly I was gripped by flashbacks. The thought sent shivers down my recently and increasingly violated body.

CHIGGERS.

I remembered the summer of my eleventh year. My first year at Boy Scout summer camp. We had camped in an open field the night before and planned a 15 mile canoe paddle for the following day. But shortly after breakfast, I felt an uncomfortable itch emanating from the most sensitive part of the male anatomy. I sneaked a peak at the Little Fireman and it looked uncharacteristically red. It looked, in fact, to be on fire. But I said nothing, chose not to peek again and boarded my canoe for the five hour trip. By the time we reached our next stop, I was in agony.

I wandered away from my fellow Scouts and had a look.

It was horrible. It was grotesque. I was terrified.

There had been significant swelling. It looked like a fireapple-red baseball, perched atop half a roll of pennies. If it is really true that "size matters," then it

By the time we reached our next stop, I was in agony. I wandered away from my fellow Scouts and had a look. It was horrible. It was grotesque. I was terrified. There had been significant swelling. If it is really true that "size matters," then it is also true that I peaked when I was 11 years old.

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Mortified, but needing to share my predicament with someone, I sought out my friend Rusty and when nobody else was looking our way, I showed him my injured part.

"OH MY GOD!" he exclaimed. "That's horrible! Mr. Morey has to see this." He dragged me to my scoutmaster, a wonderfully calm and reasonable man who could always soothe us when the fear of camping and being away from our mothers became too much. Mr. Morey would know what to do.

"OH MY GOD!" he cried. "Jack! Jack!" Mr. Morey called to Mr. Steiner, the assistant scoutmaster. "You've got to see this!"

Soon a crowd began to form.

It was decided that I needed medical treatment and so Mr. Steiner loaded me into his station wagon and we made a mad dash for the Leitchfield, Kentucky community hospital. We were met at the ER

THE CANYON COUNTRY
ZEPHYR
Planet Earth Edition

JIM & TONYA STILES, publishers
PO Box 271
Monticello, UT 84535
www.canyoncountryzephyr.com
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entrance by a stern looking nurse who wanted to know the precise nature of my ailment. I showed her.

“OH MY GOD!!!!” She summoned the doctors.

“OH MY GOD!!!” By now it had become something of a theme.

Once the commotion died down, the issue of treatment was finally raised. No one knew what to do because none of them had ever seen anything quite like the spectacle I presented. Now, years later, I wish to hell I’d had a camera.

Finally one of the doctors suggested an anti-itch spray called Multi-Derm. It was supposed to be effective but had never been applied to this part of the body. What were the side effects? Could it make matters worse? I didn’t see how that was possible and pleaded with them to spray me. The doctors agreed. (Here, as before, a crowd had gathered. Nurses, doctors, technicians, other ER patients.)

But the plastic spray nozzle jammed. Nothing would come out of the can. Finally one of the doctors pulled the nozzle from the can, jammed a screwdriver into the tube and leveraged it back like one might raise a carjack.

An explosion of Multi-Derm spewed from the can onto my affected area and knocked me against the wall. I remember it was also very cold and for the first time in 16 hours, it didn’t itch.

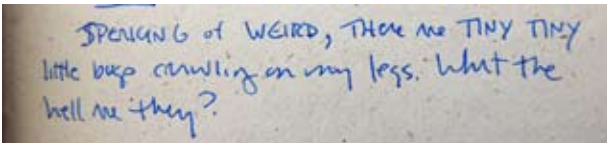
“Do it again!” I pleaded and they did.

“Again!” I cried. Now the doctors thought I was beginning to enjoy the Multi-Derm more than was deemed appropriate and advised me I could only be sprayed every eight hours.

Finally, Mr. Steiner drove me back to our main camp, which was chigger-free. “I don’t think you need to camp in any more fields for a while,” he assured me. I spent the next two days alone, except for Mr. Steiner and my can of Multi-Derm. By the end of the week I was healed.

* * *

Now, decades later, in Australia, the fears of such a re-occurrence gripped me with dread. I finally drove to Bunbury and found my friends Steve and Gaynor who saw the Fear in me and offered the use of their wonderful shower.



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But it was too late. In fact, it was only after my hot shower and a hard scrubbing that the welts first appeared. From my calves to my neck, I was suddenly covered by more than one hundred ugly red pimples. And they itched with a familiarity that carried me back decades. None of them had made their way to the scene of the original crime, but they were close enough. Later I learned that I had been consumed by an evil little beast called Trombicula (eutrombicula) hirsti, commonly called “the scrub-itch mite.” MITES? Indeed. It turns out they’re the Aussie version of a Kentucky chigger.

I came back to the United States, and to my destiny with Miss T, covered literally from my shoulders to my ankles with bright red welts. I explained that the bites were temporary (and not contagious) and assured her they’d go away soon. But they lingered for months. I tried to avoid scratching in front of her, but sometimes the itch was so excruciating,

I couldn’t control myself. She seemed more curious than repulsed and one day she said to me, ‘You know, I really don’t know what that feels like... itching, I mean.’

I’d never heard of such a condition....nothing made her itch? But she has such a fair skin.

“Oh...I guess sometimes. But bugs like that don’t bother me.”

I’d soon learn that her fear--her phobia of spiders--trumped any grudge for other insects that I’d ever held, but it was true. Mosquitoes, midges, gnats, anything that might cause ‘itching and swelling’ failed to faze her. Even a wasp sting barely caused concern; the area of the sting got red for a few minutes and then went away. The last time I locked horns with a wasp, my head swelled up like a pumpkin gone bad--I looked like The Joker.

Still, I am happy for my wife’s good fortune--no one should suffer as I have---but the fact she has avoided this kind of misery also makes it difficult for her to ‘feel my pain.’ It’s hard for such people to empathize with someone who’s scratching themselves nutty. And the truth is, someone who doesn’t know the heartache of itching can sometimes fail to notice the conditions that might make someone else itch to begin with. And so, when I went West for a couple weeks this Summer to spend some time in San Juan County, little did I know the nightmare that would await me when I returned home.

You see, we have these three cats. They are the sweetest, most lovable creatures I’ve ever known. They had been neighborhood strays and fared well, moving from home to home for handouts--we called it, ‘making the buffet circuit’---but when they found us, we all bonded and they became semi-permanent residents here on Main Street USA.

They were and are outside cats--they access the utility room in the winter when the cold comes, but they predominantly prefer the freedom of the outdoors--walls and doors and even ceilings trouble them.



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But while I was away, Tonya needed some extra company to fill the void created by my absence, and so Rambo, Rascal and Possum moved in. Via the cat door we’d installed years before for our old, now deceased cats, they discovered they could come and go at will. And they did.

Rambo spent his nights under the bed and the hot afternoons sprawled beneath my mother’s Welsh dresser. Rascal often resided on his back, legs outstretched on our fake leather couch. Possum, the one who suffers from ADHD, moved around a lot. Tonya told me about the cats’ move indoors and I was delighted. I had earlier felt like an ogre, watching them sit longingly outside our door. Possum especially had taken to climbing the screen, thinking if he could reach the top of the door, he’d gain interior access. So it was with a certain degree of relief that I learned Tonya had relented and let the big fellas in. But my relief was short-lived.

A couple days after I got home, I awoke to...god help me...a terrific itch. I looked at my ankles and they were speckled with inflamed red welts. There must have been 30 or 40 marks. But what? How? We’d had some mosquitoes earlier in the summer after the rains, and I’d ventured out last night to see the full moon, but how had this many skeeters attacked me in those brief moments? I hadn’t been in any tall grass. Chiggers were out of the question.

I made some coffee and wandered into the living room; there on the couch was Rascal, inverted as usual. How a nine pound cat can occupy the entire sofa is beyond me, but as I dragged him from the center cushion, I saw a speck of something emerge from his fur, and it leapt upon me. It happened so quickly I could scarcely comprehend the event. But then I saw another. And another.

Fleas.

I was being consumed by goddamn fleas. For weeks, these tiny evil creatures had invaded our home, getting a free ride with Rambo, Rascal and Possum, coming and going, like the cats, at will. Tonya, immune to their bites, was unaware of their presence until the fleas’ main meal came home from Utah.

Now it is October. Two months have passed since this ordeal began. The numbers have been reduced but they are still here.

We counter-attacked, though sadly it meant cutting off inside privileges to the boys. We vacuumed, scrubbed, moved stuff off the floor, bought an organic peppermint/clove-based spray that promised to rid us of our (my) blood-sucking fleas. Still they came.

To hell with it, I bought enough cans of toxic fogger to kill a average-sized midwest community. We abandoned the house for the day, sure we’d turned a page. But the next day, they still kept crawling up my leg. I considered moving to Antarctica.

We even went extravagant (or desperate) and bought an expensive high-velocity vacuum cleaner, hoping we could suck these evil monsters out of existence.. At night we followed a tip from the Farmers Almanac and set out saucers of soapy water with a light just above it. Each morning we trapped more fleas.

Now it is October. Two months have passed since this ordeal began. The numbers of fleas have been reduced but they are still here. A flea landed on me just last night and while I wasn’t looking, bit me on my forearm twice and even managed to take a nibble out of my ass.

All that’s left now, my only surviving hope, is that winter will come soon, that storms and arctic-like temperatures will arrive and kill these little bastards once and for all. I’ve read that they cannot survive Fahrenheit temps below 37 degrees, but I’m praying for sub-freezing weather, just to be sure.

Next March, after another long dark winter, I’ll probably be ready for Spring again. But my joy will be tempered by the memory of these fleas, and whatever biting insect awaits me next. And after watching me scratch away the summer, I’m sure Tonya will be more empathetic in 2016, even if she can’t physically “feel my pain.” For that, we can both be grateful