

A Tale of Two Ticks: Near Death in a Far Land



Two ticks, one in Rhode Island, the other in Central India, injected and infected me with the most vicious of microbial beasts. “What’s the probability of that?” you might ask. How could two ticks, nearly 8,000 miles apart, find me so irresistible? Is it the spicy flavor of my Sicilian blood from too much puttanesca? Whatever the attraction, those two ticks really took their toll.

It was the summer of 2010 that the Rhode Island tick thrust me into a tailspin. Or was it a nosedive? Probably both. Anyone whose gone with undiagnosed Lyme Disease for any length of time will agree. It started with a trickle of symptoms, a flu-like cold, a goopy eye infection, extreme fatigue (I never noticed a bulls-eye rash). After 10 or more months it grew to an assault of major proportions. Everything from random joints ballooning, legs ping-pong, jolting, stinging, thunderbolts of lightning, very, very frightening. Sending shivers down my spine, body’s aching all the time ... down to my very soul, I mean soles of my feet, as if they were pounded with a meat tenderizer.

If that isn’t bad enough, those corkscrew bacteria, *Borrelia*, spiraled their way into my brain and I couldn’t find my way home. Literally, I got lost, not recognizing the road where I live, and I’m singing, “Take me home, country road.” But it would only get worse, when those thunderbolts and electric jolts struck my brain. Or maybe it was more like a spike being driven into my skull? Luckily, with a little help from my friends, Doctor Staci arrived, sleuthed the symptoms and supplied the magic of medicine. She rescued me from the living hell I had descended into. But it was a long, long road home.

Then, on the other side of the world, tick #2 found me irresistibly delicious. Could it have been the hot madras curry (of which I ate many) in my blood? On my recent trip to India, I encountered “Leopards and Tigers and Ticks, Oh My!” During a short walk in a tiger reserve, a wild boar darted across my path, kicking up dust. Our guide warned, “Don’t get close, they can be quite dangerous.” Nearby, langur monkeys eyed us suspiciously. On game drives wildlife abounds, but we never saw the elusive tigers, despite evidence of paw marks and hearing them snore. Even big cats take cat naps. But the rare spotting of a leopard kept me from focusing on the tick on my leg that carried Spotted Fever, a lethal disease with a 35% death rate. Not a bad kill rate for a tick-borne micro-beast (*Rickettsia*), especially since there are much larger predators in Indian tiger reserves.

Just days later, while in the north of India, I dismissed a bout of diarrhea as “Delhi belly.” Persistent blurry eyes, I blamed on the smoky funeral pyres at Varanasi. My swollen knees? Must be from climbing

the ghats (steep steps) along the Ganges River. In Agra at the Taj Mahal, I could barely walk with my inflated joints and overwhelming fatigue. By the time we got to Jaipur, a rash raged over my body. Two doctors and two misdiagnoses underscored the rarity of Indian Tick Typhus. It's a Spotted Fever variety that is seldom seen in cities in India.

With all good intentions and butt injections (with god knows what!), a mishmash of meds, antibiotics, antacids and a cough syrup tasting of cardamom did little to quell the assault. My insides were on fire, with knees and ankles ballooning, a muddled malaise, disturbing delirium and a lack of equilibrium. For me, things would only get worse with frightening nightmares and bizarre hallucinations. I laughed when a chair became animated or when a wild boar grew mohawk hair and flashed its electrified blinking eyes.

And then, the rash thickened into a deeper shade of red and purple-black. And my, oh my, my photophobic eyes. I was blinded by the light. Close the shades, I couldn't stand the light of day.

The next day, my left eye turned a zombie shade of purple-red. We flew on to Scandinavia where my husband, Jim, snagged an earlier flight to Boston. I worried I'd go blind. My self-diagnosis was disturbing. Crossing my fingers that I wouldn't get stopped and interrogated over my zombie eye, I passed the test barring vampires and zombies from entry into the US.

Jim hailed a taxi to Massachusetts General Hospital. I was admitted through the ER, then shuttled between MGH and Mass Eye and Ear Hospital. At MGH, I was isolated until contagious diseases could be ruled out. Neither Spotted Fever nor Lyme Disease are contagious. The doctors, nurses and hospital staff saved my life. Hugs and kisses to them.

Some people say I must be a tick magnet. Even now, those ticks are always on my mind, as they should be for anyone living in Rhode Island and anywhere in the northeast. Lyme disease is nasty, even if it doesn't kill you. Spotted Fever diseases are a rarity in Rhode Island, but Lyme lurks in your own backyard. Tick-borne illnesses are pernicious, malicious and insidious. And I have had enough! I am really ticked-off.