

# Plagued

Morgan Charles



CREATIVE NONFICTION  
WINNER

My parents' house had a moth infestation. It started as soon as the sun set: a slight fluttering around the edges that intensified until the air in the living room vibrated with them. "These goddamn things!" my father yelled as he swatted at them from his recliner. They created a pixelated blur on the television screen, strobed the reading lamp behind his head. I clapped them between my hands and they disappeared into powdery dust, like a magic trick. But it didn't matter: they kept coming.

I was just starting to show by then, and making the commute from Toronto to Ottawa less often than I had. My dad had been sick for a couple of years, and I tried to go back at least once a month, but it was trickier now that I had so many of my own appointments to keep track of. The doctors had told him he couldn't drive anymore because of the brain metastases, so when I was home I chauffeured him to his radiation appointments. Other than that, we spent most of the time in the house.

Like the rest of us, the moths were drawn to the living room, the massive TV a beacon. My father used it for company the way some people used the radio. Even if he was in another room, he left it on, mutely addressing the furniture. Since his diagnosis, he'd become indiscriminate in his tastes: reality shows about storage lockers or ice road truckers had replaced dramas, even comedies, which were far too unpredictable. If a show contained any reference to cancer, we'd squirm until another reason gave us cover to change the channel.

But watching is not the right description for what he did — just as often he stared into space, or out the window at the backyard, twirling the hair at the back of his head that had grown back fuzzy from chemo, the television rambling like a clueless neighbour. Whenever some well-meaning person would mention how meditation might be helpful, he always said "I do meditate," and I knew this is what he meant.

I couldn't do much right, even when I was home: I was always trying to have conversations my dad didn't want to have, like maybe he should be more patient with my mother, who lived on the edge of tears, or suggesting outings he was too tired for. I made him green smoothies that he found

aggressively disgusting, admonished him for eating too much sugar. The moths though, that felt like something I could do. Something I could fix.

Initially, it seemed simple. All I had to do was figure out the moths' food supply and destroy it. First, we took the kitchen apart.

"Jesus, Mom, how old *are* these?" my brother Max asked, piling half-empty packages of rice on the counter. Before they took his licence away, my dad was in the habit of stopping at the grocery store nearly every day on his way home from work to buy ingredients for whatever elaborate recipe he had in mind, never throwing anything away. Making a sandwich at their house necessitated long excavations through half-finished chutneys and expired pesto containers.

I looked at the bag at the top of the pile: "Best before 2012," I said, holding it up to the light. Inside I could see grains of rice dangling from long stringy webs. Promising. I turned back to the pantry and eyed the half-finished bags of almond and chickpea flours, relics from my parent's gluten-free phase a few years earlier.

"Just throw it all out," my mother said, waving at the pantry dismissively as she threw dented cans directly in the trash. She wanted a fresh start.

When I was home, sometimes I'd try to turn the TV off and initiate the type of meaningful conversation with my dad that I felt we should be having. But he didn't want to talk: he preferred the undemanding and companionable chatter of the television.

But just as often, the TV itself became a source of frustration. A couple of years before he got sick, my dad had hired a guy to install a large wall-mounted flat screen, which was connected through a series of hidden wires to a receiver and sound system in the nearby toy closet, so-called for its former vocation. The machinery in the closet reminded me of photos I'd seen of the first computers, an imposing stack of black boxes with lights and knobs and wires that no one knew how to use and so mostly avoided. Whenever there was a problem with the TV, which was often (four remotes were required just to turn it on), my parents had to call Russell, the installer, to come and fix it. Russell had recently had twins and kept putting my parents off, compounding my father's frustration. "Ten thousand dollars and the bloody thing won't even turn on," he'd say, pressing buttons with one hand and swatting moths with the other.

"They got ripped off," my brother said, shaking his head.

And later: "Fucking Russell."

The kitchen purge had no discernible effect on the moths' numbers, so we decided they must not be pantry moths at all but the more pernicious fabric moth. My friend had been dealing with them for over a year. She'd vacuum-sealed all her natural fibres in giant Ziploc bags, spent a fortune at the dry cleaners, cedar planks in every drawer, and still, the tiny holes in her sweaters.

I knew what the eggs looked like. When I was thirteen years old, away at summer camp, I used one of my dad's old work shirts as a smock for arts and crafts. One day, I went to put it on and found a patch of tiny white eggs like beads embroidered with an almost mathematical precision. I gagged, and hid the shirt behind a box of art supplies for the rest of the summer.

My parents didn't have holes in their clothes but I decided to investigate their bedroom anyways. We all knew by then that something could grow silently in one place for months, or years, before announcing itself in another location. I checked my mother's closet and drawers first, but didn't find anything. The plush beige carpet absorbed any sound as I crossed the room to my father's closet. I opened it tentatively, but the only movement was the swish and clang of ties and belts hanging on the back of the door. His closet was my favourite hiding place as a kid, alone in the quiet dark with the lingering smell of his aftershave, the thrill of waiting to be found. Now it was filled with the work clothes he didn't wear anymore. I rifled through his pressed shirts and folded sweatshirts. No moths. I closed the door.

One day when the TV wasn't working, I sat with my dad in the living room. I asked him about his father. He'd always been a mystery to me; he died when I was two years old. All I knew was that he'd quit drinking after a stroke in his forties.

"He was what you'd call a cardiac personality," my dad said, indulging me. "Very worried, fussed over his roses, his stamp collection, his coins..." Sounds familiar, I joked, but he kept going. "Your uncle and him never got along, and Grandma blamed him for Derek leaving home so young. But he was a good father, always stood up for me."

A few hours later, the TV was working again and we were watching *Antiques Roadshow*. Out of the blue, my father, still looking at the TV, said "One thing I always remember about my dad is how he would clean my cars."

"Really?" I laughed, surprised. "Like with a Q-tip? Everyday?" I had to stop myself from rushing in with too many questions, like he was a skittish horse that I didn't want to spook.

“No — every few months. Or weeks. Yeah, Q-tips. It was our time together, my time with my dad.”

I laughed again, but I found the image heartbreaking. I pictured them in my grandma’s yellow kitchen in the 1950s, a skinny kid with a cowlick sitting on a stool in front of my mysterious grandfather, for some reason wearing his air force uniform from old photographs. A Norman Rockwell painting: *Father and Son with Q-tips*. My dad, swinging his legs, trying to say the right thing to his distracted, worried father.

I waited for him to say more about it but he was finished. We turned back to the television.

That January my dad went into the hospital for a craniotomy. His new scar curved like a sickle, and he joked that it made his head look like a baseball. While he rested in the living room, watching TV with the dog on his lap, Max and I went on raids of the house, still looking for moths.

We flung open unused cupboards, scoured drawers. “Clear!” my brother yelled up to me from the basement, like we were hunting a fugitive. It felt good to do something, even if it was just throwing stuff out. I’d never realized my parents were effectively low-commitment hoarders, their house big enough to defer decision-making indefinitely. I found ice skates of mine from the second grade, every piece of art I’d ever brought home, boxes of eyeglasses from the eighties, old Gameboys. So many dead batteries and paint cans.

When I came upon the ripped-open bag of dog food in the laundry room, I was triumphant. “Found it!” I yelled upstairs. I didn’t see any moths, but that didn’t deter me. I threw out the bag and replaced it with a large Rubbermaid container. “Make sure you close it *tightly*,” I instructed my mother, as if she were a child.

For a while we pretended there was an improvement, as though maybe the moths were taking a while to slowly die out. Soon it was impossible to deny that they were as bad as ever. I grew as frustrated as my father, cursing as I swatted indiscriminately, leaving powdery brown smears on the walls. “It’s like a plague,” I said.

In the Bible, it’s locusts that God sends as a plague, not moths. I had to look it up, but moths are referenced repeatedly in both the Old and New Testaments, almost always to connote decay and destruction, either that of worldly goods, or our own physical remains. “So man wastes away like something rotten, like a garment eaten by moths,” Job laments. The

symbolism felt a bit on the nose: like we needed any more reminders of our mortality.

One morning over breakfast, my father announced to my mother and me that he'd been thinking of getting baptized. We weren't a religious family. Sometimes we went to church as kids for Christmas (Gameboys on mute), but my father's family was agnostic. I couldn't tell if he was serious; he was generally skeptical to an exasperating degree, quick to categorize everything as either bunk or hooey. It was hard to picture him being willingly dunked in a pool of magic water.

"I can't imagine any god I believe in would care about something like that," my mother said, a bit smug in her lapsed Catholicism: she'd been baptized, confirmed, the whole thing.

My father chewed thoughtfully and looked out the window behind her. "Well, who knows?" he said. "Maybe I should hedge my bets."

Conversations like these were as close as we ever got to discussing death. It was tacitly understood that we could not talk to Dad directly about anything upsetting, but even among the three of us we rarely acknowledged the reality of his prognosis. As though Stage 4 was not the final stage. As though palliative meant only pain relief. Death was only ever allowed in vague, stilted conversations my dad tried to have with us about finances, or my mother's relieved laughter as she recounted the oncologist telling them that he could still "buy the green bananas," as though this were incredibly encouraging. As if bananas didn't ripen in days.

Sometime that February, my husband Marc and I sat watching a British mystery with my father, who guarded the remote on the arm of his chair. Pheromone moth traps littered every available surface, their sticky interiors studded with bodies. We pretended that the situation was under control, but I knew it was futile if we couldn't locate the source.

My dad's belly looked more and more like mine from the steroids; we'd taken a picture together that day of the two of us on the couch, matching basketballs under our shirts. My back hurt from the long drive and I wondered about those microwavable therapy bags that my mother used for her neck. The ones full of oats.

I got up from the couch. "Do we still have those MagicBags?" I asked, already on my way to the kitchen.

My mother was sitting at the dining room table with her laptop open, a glass of wine beside her as she scrolled through Facebook. "I think so," she said, looking up. "Maybe over the coffcemaker?"

*This is it this is it this is it.* The bags were behind a box of Keurig pods. I grabbed one, willed some movement, a flutter, spill of oats through a telltale hole. But there was nothing.

*Fuck.*

Max had moved back from Japan permanently by then to help after dad's surgery, and the moths were getting to him. "I can't figure it out," he said another night after Marc and I had arrived from Toronto. "I've looked everywhere." His eyes were red, and when he ran his hands roughly through his hair, I noticed a few greys.

"Maybe they're in the drywall, I saw that online," I said. I'd read about people ripping their houses apart trying to locate the source, Youtube videos of half-mad people describing infestations that had begun in the kitchen only to metastasize throughout the entire house. I looked at the walls of the living room, which seemed to hum with a malevolent energy. A female could get into even the tiniest crack, lay up to 300 microscopic eggs. Impossible to fully eradicate. I wondered if there was a way we could stick a camera or a medical scope into a hole in the drywall, just to see . . .

I felt something hard, an elbow or a foot, push against my abdomen and flip over. Earlier in the week I'd been for another ultrasound, and after a long, almost hostile silence from the technician while she took measurements, she turned the screen towards me. She scrolled around and a face appeared on the monitor, eyes wide and unblinking, a tiny hand cupped around the side of a face the way someone might to peer inside the window of a car.

"Wow," I said. "I didn't know they could keep their eyes open like that." She still hadn't blinked.

"Oh yeah, sometimes," the technician replied, scrolling around the drying gel on my stomach, looking for a good angle to print for Marc. Whenever she came back to the face, the eyes stared out at us still, unseeing.

My mother called me home in March. After a couple weeks of saying everything was fine, she admitted they'd actually gotten much worse. My father was recovering from the cyberknife procedure by then, and couldn't be alone because of the seizure risk, but he wouldn't let my mother hire anyone to help. It had to be one of us.

When I was in Toronto, I thought only of how I should be in Ottawa, but when I was there, I needed to take frequent breaks to go scream into the pile of folded towels on top of the dryer. All my father wanted to do when he wasn't watching TV was make lists of things that needed fixing or buying or

organizing. He kept trying to do everything himself, and had gotten angry at me the night before for “fussing” after he’d had a seizure while trying to light an instant log in the fireplace.

“You almost set yourself on fire,” I said, unable to keep the frustration out of my voice.

“You and your mother,” he said. “So dramatic.” He brushed his charred sleeve and went back to the TV.

By the end of the month he was back in the hospital with complications, fluid build-up on his frontal lobe. He was too volatile to come home; twice the week before he’d had to be restrained after being told he couldn’t leave. He was confused and angry most of the time, but at least there were no moths at the hospital.

If no one was with him, he’d call my mother non-stop, asking where she was and when he could come home, so we took turns going to visit him. When I got to his room one day, I found him sitting in the chair with his breakfast tray. He greeted me the way he always did: “Where’s Mum?”

I gave him the clementines I brought him from home and sat in the other chair. The room was tiny and shared, a large white curtain pulled around the bed of the other patient. I told my father how we’d cleaned out the pantry in the kitchen again the night before to try and get rid of the moths before he came home.

“Good,” he nodded. “When can I get out of here?”

“I don’t know, Dad.” To distract him I asked him if he had any good names for the baby.

He didn’t answer. After a second he asked “Are you looking forward to your daughter being this age?” He was looking down, plucking at his hospital gown.

I didn’t know what to say. I had the feeling again of being offered a small chance, a window I had to figure out how to open. “Do you mean my age or yours?” It was a dumb question, but all I could think of in the moment.

He didn’t answer. Instead: “When’s your train?”

“Not for a few hours,” I said, feeling I’d failed again.

“Well,” he looked away from me. “You don’t want to miss it.”

The occupational therapist came in then to run some tests. She asked him to write a sentence.

“What do I write?” he asked, the pen in his hand.

“Whatever you want,” she said.

He scratched something illegible on the paper.

“What does it say?” she asked.

*“It’s dreary and I want to go home,”* he said.

By late April they were getting ready to discharge him. I had to be back for scans every week that late in my pregnancy, so I was trying to help my mother arrange full-time homecare from Toronto. I was also trying to set up the nursery, but all I could think about were the moths. My brother texted me that they were still flying around the living room, which had been emptied of everything except the TV, an armchair, a rented hospital bed and a lift.

I googled articles I’d already read, speed reading until something jumped out at me. “Check for unlikely food sources in non-kitchen locations, eg. Dog food and open birdseed containers.” I thought of my dad in the living room, watching the birds in the backyard, the feeders he filled every spring.

I texted my brother. “Where does dad keep the birdseed?”

It took Max a while, but eventually he looked in the toy closet. Tucked away under the shelf that held the TV machinery was a large tin, roughly the size and shape of a small garbage can, with an ill-fitting, dented lid. I wasn’t there when my brother opened it, but I remember as though I was, the flapping of brown wings a deliverance, a benediction.