

PROLOGUE

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Anna

I have a garden now, and often I sit there and think about how the plague began. The plants don't care where the Splits came from or by what magic it turns us into these animated cadavers, these skin-and-bone machines. The plants can't catch it because they're not conscious, they have no mind to lose.

My favourite spot is the bench at the back where the star jasmine climbs. In cold weather I take hot tea, in warm weather iced water. I look at the pointed leaves, the white flowers, and I ponder what is gone. My husband, my sister's mind, the tranquil assumption that my son is safe.

At other times, in certain moods, I think about what the Splits has given me. A brief efflorescence as a journalist, a certainty that I am not sick. And now, it seems, a nephew. It has given me back Michael. Whether I like it or not. I think I do.

The pandemic began in February 1969. There was a patient zero - a teacher lost his mind in a classroom - but like everybody else I assumed it was a one-off, a freak event. It happened in New York, a city I always imagine as London's younger, crazier sibling. Most papers gave the story just one paragraph.

Now, of course, I can recite the details with my eyes closed. The school was in Queens, the teacher's name was Luke Mitcham, and he'd been explaining the structure of the atom to a twelfth grade science class.

There's no account of the classroom. I imagine there would have been a window on to a campus or perhaps one of those wide, busy city streets. Freezing winter rain would have been streaking down outside and the daylight would have been no more than tarnished trickle. Inside, everything and everybody would have looked plastic under harsh fluorescent strip-lighting. But there's no record of this.

What is captured is that the students noticed Mitcham looked unwell. His skin was clammy and he had an odd rash on his left eyelid - pallid and grey, rather than pink or red. Halfway through describing electrostatic force, he looked down, tilted his head to the side and stopped speaking. A student called Tina asked him if he was okay. He turned to her, stared intently, and after a moment came out from behind his desk.

"Suddenly he was right by me," Tina said afterwards.

Most of the class took the opportunity to break into conversation, and few saw what he did next. He stretched out his hands and then with supreme speed, before she could even recoil, he grabbed her by the shoulder and the hair and buried his face in her neck.

"There was nothing elegant about it," said Caleb, one of a handful who did see. It was more as if the teacher was biting into an Octuple Bypass

burger, he added. Or something along those lines. I don't think there was such a thing as an Octuple Bypass burger in 1969.

Caleb and his friends pulled Mitcham away at which he seemed to come back to himself, in a fashion. He spat out shreds of Tina's neck, raised his hands in a gesture of surrender and mumbled an apology. Then he twisted out of their grasp, ran to the door and disappeared into the school.

Tina had fallen forward like a ragdoll, blood pooling on the floor beneath her desk. Everyone thought she was dead, or dying. But she lifted her hand and put it on the wound. The students took off their sweaters to make a soft place on the floor and tenderly laid her down. Her eyes were bright, she was very much alive. I imagine they may have whooped - Americans really do that. Or perhaps not. At any rate, she was taken to hospital and told she would survive. Which she did, for a while, in a fashion.

Meanwhile, police searched the labyrinthine building for over an hour. Eventually they heard an irregular hammering in a cupboard in the basement. A strange, glossy, translucent liquid was leaking from under the door.

When they forced it open they saw a terrifying sight. It was indeed Mitcham - he must have shut himself inside. Whatever had been on his eyelid had spread to the rest of his body. Patches of raised, purplish skin were peeling away like bark, leaving angry red lesions. These gashes were weeping vast quantities of fluid - that was what had been oozing out from under the door, the whole cupboard was sticky with it. The rapid

dehydration made him gaunt to the point of emaciation, and yet his strength was almost superhuman. It took ten officers - all of whom later became vectors for the Splits - to subdue him, two for each limb and two for his head.

I was 23 at the time and working flat out. My sister Claire had just had Michael and whenever I saw them he was screaming. I was shocked by his perpetual misery and annoyed by her masochistic dedication. I didn't have time for US news, even when the disease began to spread. I wasn't that kind of journalist anyway. My newspaper, The Harringay Tribune, was named after the ward of Harringay - a tiny segment of one city borough, population 14,000. I covered the magistrate's court, council meetings and road accidents. The salary was tiny, barely enough to scrape by in London.

The first time I really paid attention to the Splits was six months after Mitcham. I was renting a studio flat near Green Lanes. It was August, the flat was stifling, and I was drinking lime cordial by an open window. I picked up the newspaper and the front page was the disappearance of an aeroplane, Heathrow-bound BA502. It had crashed in the middle of the Atlantic after a crazed passenger went on the rampage. The report didn't spell it out, but it was obvious what was wrong with the woman. If one sick person could board a plane to the UK once then so could another. Sooner or later the infection would arrive on British shores.

Most of us had seen an infected by then, in photos or on the TV. We knew how the disease

was transmitted and its appalling course. Immediately after BA502 a restrained panic spread through the population. Sales of gas masks, knives and bludgeoning sticks soared, as did home security enhancements. But nobody took to the streets. Nobody went on strike over something that was so obviously an act of God.

I was afraid too. But I was young, I was busy, I didn't think the situation would affect me. I doubt I would have got so involved in trying to understand the disease if the first attack on UK soil had not been in Harringay. A pensioner, Donald Carey, bit a young woman, Katie Logan, on the face. It was my patch so I wrote it up, and that was how I became the paper's unofficial Splits correspondent. I have retained a vague, unacknowledged identity as an expert on the disease ever since. But I'm sick of the subject now. Sick of the Splits.

Perhaps that's why I like the garden so much. The plants are indifferent to the Splits. They don't worry about it because they're too simple. A star jasmine has no mind to lose.

Part One

Outbreak

1969

Claire

I can't quite say when I realised there was something unusual about my baby. He was born in February, a few weeks before the Splits hit America and many months before it arrived here. I was just twenty-one years old and it was all such a shock, everything was a bit of a blur. I do know the boy we took home from hospital that February was a dear little thing. He had a fat tummy and narrow beady eyes, hair soft as a kitten. He made me melt. He wanted me so much, a hungry love that I delighted in.

It was Martin who roused us into having children so quickly. My big sister Anna did not even have a husband let alone a family. I wanted kids but I would have liked to wait a bit longer. Martin's enthusiasm swept my doubts away. And indeed the whole thing started well – conceiving was fun, and pregnancy made me feel as if the world was sparkling. My skin cleared, my hair thickened, I had more energy than I've ever known.

The only worry had been rather an odd one, I suppose. When I was about four months along we'd gone for a walk in Richmond Park. Amidst

the wide perfect grassy expanse I came across a grey plastic bag. I was furious at whoever had littered such a beautiful place and I picked it up, intending to throw it away when I passed the next bin. But the bag was covered in a strange grey goo. It wasn't like anything I'd seen before, and to this day I still cannot explain what it might have been. I dropped it but the stuff was all over my hands. Martin wiped off as much as he could with his handkerchief but it was another hour before we got to a public convenience and I could wash them. I fretted for the rest of the pregnancy that there was some poison in the slime that had harmed my baby.

Giving birth was very distressing. The midwives were unable to give me a caudal block for reasons I never understood and the pain went on for hours, getting so bad I believe I passed out for short periods. The baby got stuck and they had to pull him from me with forceps. They took him away before I could look at him, and did not bring him back. When they explained afterwards that he was floppy, breathing weakly, with blue hands and feet it did not surprise me. Even before I knew how poorly he'd been, I'd felt death in the room.

The first time I saw him he was in an incubator receiving oxygen. We were told we were lucky he was in such good health because my placenta had broken away from my uterus while he was still inside. If he had been born just a few minutes later he would have been brain damaged or dead. I did not feel lucky – I could not touch him or hold him. Only when they finally put him in my arms

did I feel a little bit lucky. I had done it. We had our own baby, with a full head of dark hair, and tiny, perfect hands. We called him Michael. The only place Michael was happy was with me – he would not let Martin hold him. I hoped that would change but I adored the feeling that I was everything to him.

By the time I brought him home I was uneasy again. The house was huge – it had four bedrooms, ready for two more babies or maybe three – and the whole place was arctic because Martin had let the fires go out. We had finally moved in just a few weeks before Michael was born and the house's sounds, its smells, its beautiful alcoves and its useful crevices, were alien to me. It made me think of an industrial freezer, the kind where they store carcasses on hooks. I told myself not to be silly, I was just thinking that way because it was unfamiliar.

I sat down at the kitchen table, holding Michael while the wind picked up outside. His tiny body brought me back into balance. It was almost as if he was my parent – our mutual clinging comforted me as much as it did him, if not more.

Martin lit a fire then sat down beside me, took my hand and smiled. I knew what the smile meant – our project was on track – but I could not share his feeling. I was tuned in to the funny soft world that I imagined was Michael's. I cannot honestly say I felt anything very clearly. Does a baby feel happy, or sad? Still, it was good that Martin smiled. It was better than him not smiling. It warmed me a little.

Michael went to sleep at 10pm that night.

At 11pm he started to cry. He was in the next room, but it sounded like sheets ripping right by my ear. Despite my efforts to soothe him, he cried for three-quarters of an hour without stopping.

He woke and cried again at 12.33am, 1.45am, 3.11am and 5.04am. I know because I started to write it down.

This continued for several more nights, and after a while something odd happened. By day my vision was grainy as if I was watching my life on scratched film fed through an old projector. By night I saw shadowy figures in the corner of my vision, and cold fury in the blank stares of soft toys. I told myself this must be normal. I had wanted a child, now I had one – there you go. I never once put the pillow over my head. I always went to him when he cried. I began to feel that I was coping really well with the sleep deprivation, and that I must be adjusting.

Before long I might even be able to return to my needlecraft. I'd been trying pulled-thread embroidery before Michael had arrived and the idea of getting back to it was wonderfully soothing.

As the weather changed I decided to take Michael to a baby group. These were quite a new idea and I was excited about meeting other mums – comparing notes about sleepless nights and feeding schedules and what have you. But somehow everything I said came out wrong. I began to realise that the other mums did not see me as one of them. I did not dare speak to them again so I tried to interest Michael in the toys, but that just made him cry. After a while, I found

myself watching the other babies. I noticed how they smiled, reached happily for the rattles and teddies and met their mothers' eyes. Maybe that was when I first noticed there was something different about him. I'm not sure. At any rate, I never went back to a baby group.

I battled all year to get him to sleep through the night. Just as he began to do so the Splits broke out in London. An old man attacked a young woman at a bus stop. It was December and Michael was ten months old.

Anna

Katie Logan, the young woman bitten in Harringay, was taken by ambulance to A&E at the Whittington Hospital. Her physical condition deteriorated rapidly but it still took staff half an hour to realise what was going on. While they were making arrangements to transfer her somewhere secure, she went for the guard stationed by her bed, who then attacked a group of nurses. The army arrived and eighteen people with symptoms of the infection, including Logan herself, were bundled into the back of an armoured truck.

That was the gist of the report I filed for *The Trib*. Overnight there was a spate of attacks along the bus route between the hospital and Green Lanes, and the next morning it was clear I would have to fish the story out and write more. But I was never able to go back to it because at 10.30am, under instructions from the Ministry of Defence,

Haringey was shut down. *The Trib* closed shop and sent us all home.

I suppose I was lucky. I had good information and nobody to worry about but myself. I would have hated to be Claire, looking after a baby through all of this.

By the time I was back in my flat the telephone line was down, the TV was off air and my only link to the outside world was my radio. When I tuned in to the national stations there was nothing but static so I tried a London frequency.

"This is the UK National Security Council," said a nameless announcer. *"There has been an outbreak of the Frenzy in London. The UK's civil resilience network is now taking a series of prepared steps to contain the situation. There is no need to panic, but as a precaution we are asking Londoners to stay indoors. Residents of Haringey should not leave their homes under any circumstances. Please return to your radio regularly for further updates."*

I had seen the pictures, I had read the articles. I knew about the US where whole neighbourhoods were quarantined after everyone in them got sick. I looked around my living room-cum-bedroom-cum-kitchen and wondered how I would die. I passed a miserable ten or twenty minutes in this way, imagining being bitten and then slowly falling to pieces in my sofa bed, until my reverie was interrupted by a throb of hunger. I didn't need to open the fridge, I knew it contained nothing substantial. I walked over to the window and pulled open the curtains. It was a beautiful evening. The slate roofs and chimney pots were jet black against an indigo sky with a slight pink

stain towards the edge. The street was empty. No infected, no sign of danger. And I was curious. I decided to take a chance – if I saw anything I would turn back.

It was quieter than Christmas Day when I opened my door and walked down to Green Lanes. Usually the tavernas and bakeries lit up the street like a string of giant fairy lights, and I would make for a favourite haunt for a *souvla*. Tonight everything was dark, shuttered. The sole taverna with the lights on was one I did not ordinarily frequent. Inside a man was chopping lettuce with a meat cleaver. His mouth was closed tight, his jaw thrust out. His head whipped round when I opened the door. He looked terrified, then delighted.

“Good evening, lady! What can I do for you?” he called. I’d experienced a Greek Cypriot’s pleasure at seeing an English lady in his restaurant before, but tonight’s greeting had a particular intensity.

“Chicken souvlaki to take away, all the sauces,” I replied, taking out my purse.

I waited while he spread the wrap and pulled the meat off the skewer. The meat was overdone – with so few customers it had been too long on the grill.

“We’re supposed to stay at home,” I said.

“Pffft,” said the man, waving his hand. “I’ve got five kids to feed. I’ve got to make money. I can’t just close. I’ve also got this.” He picked up the meat cleaver, and with a flick of his powerful forearm embedded it in an imaginary skull. “What brings you out?”

"I was hungry."

He nodded. "You got a weapon?"

"No."

"Be careful, lady," he said. He looked towards the glass, and I looked after him. The night had come in and the street was just blue-black shapes.

"Have you seen anything?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I saw a man running. That's all."

"You think he was infected?"

"I don't know. They don't run, do they, they're slow. And he was crying."

I gave him two shillings. He put the wrap on the counter and handed me my change. As he did so he gripped my hand, pressed the handle of the meat cleaver into my palm on top of the coins, and closed my fingers round it.

"But don't you need it?"

He waved, already chopping lettuce again, with a knife this time. "Pffft. I got several."

Claire

Martin was away on business in Sheffield so we were alone during the outbreak. Our phone line was down and there was no way to get in touch with him. I was sure he did not know what was going on in Haringey or he would have come home without delay.

The radio said to stay indoors. That was difficult. Ten-month-old babies get very frustrated if they cannot have a change of scene, and become increasingly hard to cheer up. Or mine did. Things would have been so much easier

if I could have walked to the shops, sat on a bench or taken Michael to the swings, even if it was freezing.

He was not interested in any of the games or toys I got out. He watched while I showed him what they did, but I could not persuade him to get involved. I kept trying. I was forced on by the thought that if I did not manage to interest him in toys now, he might never learn how to play.

I must have overdone it. I tried to make him take a toy but he dashed it to the floor, leaned forwards and raked them all angrily to one side. Then he hit me, his face a little grimace of fury. I picked him up, but he struggled and the screams started. It was like a siren – I couldn't think about anything in the normal way.

As a rule it was not yet his nap time, but he fell asleep anyway. I sat down with him in my arms, closed my eyes and breathed deeply. I knew that someone who did not know him would put his tantrum down to tiredness, but I knew him better. It occurred to me he was actually afraid of the toys. My efforts had not encouraged him but frightened him.

I wished I could call Anna. She never overreacted and she had an explanation for everything, usually humorous. She always told me Michael was fine.

And we could chat like champions, Anna and I. In my mind I saw my conversations with my sister as an unruly patchwork quilt, a big jumble of ideas and memories that could grow in any direction. When we left each other's company we put it down and when we saw each other again,

we picked it up. We always started a different place from where we stopped last time, but it was the same never-ending conversation.

Michael woke up after half an hour, and the peace lasted until lunchtime. I put him in the high chair and offered him some buttery mashed potato with peas and shredded lamb. He took one mouthful, then cried and twisted in the chair until I lifted him out and gave him a bottle.

I was surviving on four hours' sleep, and walking him in a pram would be so much easier than this stifling battle. He was sometimes quiet in the pram, watching the trees and the houses and the sky winding past him. He would even chew on a biscuit or a piece of apple. But there was no way I was opening that door.

We went upstairs to the master bedroom – not for any reason, we were just wandering restlessly through the house – and I sat in the armchair by the window while Michael looked at himself in the mirror. A little later he crawled over to me and pulled himself to standing. He peered out of the window, then started bouncing and panting, gazing up at me. I lifted him on to my lap and he turned to the glass with a deft movement that surprised me, spreading his hands out and pressing his nose against it.

He looked this way and that eagerly, and when he saw nothing he gently scratched the glass. His fingernail was sharp but soft, it made almost no sound.

We stayed there for several hours. He was calm and even affectionate with me. It was strange because the street was empty – I did not

understand what he found so interesting. But it was the closest I had ever seen him to happiness and that made me happy too, so happy it was almost painful. I hugged his little round body, the pudgy legs trembling with concentrated life force, and sent all my love into his heart.

I must have fallen asleep. At any rate I heard Michael babbling, lifted my head and saw it was dusk. The window was brimming ultramarine between the strips of white wooden frame.

“Da! Da!” Michael was pointing at the street – he was a precocious pointer.

I looked down and gradually my eyes adjusted. There was something flapping in the distance, just visible between the long line of trees along the edge of the pavement. It got gradually closer, winking at me. I clutched Michael, who strained towards the window again.

“Da! Da!” he said.

I realised what he meant and flushed with pleasure. Martin. He would know what to do – he would keep us safe, and make Michael laugh. I picked Michael up, and ran down the stairs to the front door and into the street.

The gardens were muddy and damp. Trees and shrubs poked bare spikes towards a low grey sky. The street stretched out on either side as if daring us to explore. The quiet was almost total, no footsteps, no cars, no voices. No doors slamming or bicycles squeaking, no sirens. No distant noise bouncing off London’s endless sprawl. Just birdsong – thrushes, wintering chiff-chaffs and the like.

I looked towards where I had seen movement.

It was a man hobbling up the street, slowly but with determination. The flapping was his jacket swinging as he rocked from side to side. As he got closer, I saw that he was extremely thin – his clothes were stuck to his body making it impossible to miss. One foot was bent at right angles and he was walking on the ankle.

“Da!” said Michael again.

Slowly, the man turned his head towards us, by chance or because he heard Michael I don’t know. His eyeballs were dark and moist, like rotten plums. It wasn’t Martin.

I stumbled off the pavement and back inside. As I slammed the door and put the chain on, Michael roared like a chain saw. It wasn’t crying. It had nothing to do with sadness. It was rage.

I carried him screaming to the back of the house where he tried to scratch my face. His fingernails were like little razor blades. Yet even as he seethed there was something beautiful about him. His face was flushed and swollen but its lines still had a peachy clearness, the skin a pearly light, as if he was a spirit, something from beyond my ordinary day-to-day world.

He stopped crying and stared at me. His swollen lips fell back over his tiny teeth. I would like to think he saw the love in my eyes.

A moment later there was a soft scraping at the front door. Fingernails. I stared at Michael, waiting for him to make things even worse by crying again. But he stayed quiet. He looked towards the front of the house.

What if it was Martin?

There was a sound of vomiting. Then scuffling,

which gradually got quieter. I sank to the floor and lay there for a while. But Michael got cross again so I had to get up.

Lupe

We were different from other families. Most people in our block were poor but my parents had “rejected the system”. Most people had brothers and sisters but with us there was just me. Most people’s dads worked nearby but mine was always away, at conferences on the future of socialism. Most people’s mums were at home or had office jobs, but mine kept going to a hospital for sad people.

When he was around, Dad lavished help on our neighbours. He’d listen to problems and give advice. He’d write official letters and check job applications. He’d lend money, little bits, and not worry about whether he got it back. Mum said he was like an unpaid social worker.

He would tell these people exactly what to do, but he would never tell me. He said he was against hierarchical power structures and I should make my own decisions. Most of the time I did, but sometimes I couldn’t. Good and bad can be really similar, it can be hard to tell them apart. Dad said Karl Marx explained the difference but I read some and he only talked about money and work. Getting gold out of the ground and making coats, things like that. It wasn’t exactly simple but he didn’t leave any room for ... feelings, and the way our feelings make us lie to ourselves.

Mum was all too happy to tell me what to do. She timed my homework and made me go back to my desk if she thought I'd been too quick, even if the homework was finished. She'd get upset if my marks weren't good enough.

When the Splits broke out I was frustrated. Not being allowed to go outside ... I just didn't understand it. When I looked out of my bedroom window I couldn't see any sick people. I argued with Mum – Dad was overseas and we'd lost touch with him – but she went *loca* at me, started crying. For a few days I made do with reading and homework, doing my hair and listening to music.

One evening, just before bedtime, I went to my window again. I saw a little boy lying on the pavement sobbing his heart out. I remembered what Dad always said, about making my own choices. I decided to go and help him. But when I got to the pavement he was gone. I walked up and down the street