

Splits

By P.A. Cornell

Baby was crying again. My first thought on waking was that I shouldn't be hearing this. She shouldn't even exist. But even as I thought this the wailing made it all too clear she did. I threw off the covers and made my way down the hall. As I passed the other bedroom, I noticed the door was ajar and only one bed looked disturbed. I shook my head. This was something to deal with later.

I entered the room we were calling 'the nursery' these days; a room I'd once called my office and that still held my desk, but now also contained a crib. I flipped the switch on the nightlight and looked down at Baby.

"Mama," she said through sobs, stretching her arms out toward me to be picked up.

"I'm not your mom, kid," I told her for the millionth time, knowing it would make no difference. Reaching in, I picked her up, all pudgy, angry, and exhausted at once.

"Not much has changed," I said to this year-old version of me. "I'm still pudgy, angry and exhausted."

I felt the damp on her back as I held her. She was soaked through. I'd have to change not just her diaper but her full onesie. Why did this sort of thing invariably happen at two in the morning?

With no caffeine in my system to assist, I didn't have the energy to bathe her, so I just pulled off her wet clothes and cleaned her as best I could with a baby wipe. She squirmed at the cold but didn't cry and was soon back in a fresh diaper and warm onesie.

I went to put her back in her crib, but she clung to my neck, sobbing a little more as she pressed her face into my shoulder.

“Fine,” I said. “I probably won’t get any more sleep anyway. Not while Indigo—or whatever she wants us calling her this week—is off god-knows-where. We might as well stay up together.”

I carried her into the living room and sat on the couch, letting her snuggle into me. Now that I wasn’t leaving her, her eyes started to close. She was asleep again in seconds. I envied her. At my age insomnia made it so I spent hours stressing over stuff like my grocery bill quadrupling overnight before I could get to sleep. It didn’t help that I was also responsible for a moody teen who kept sneaking out at night, breaking both my rules and the law. I glanced at the coffee table where my phone charger lay, the actual phone nowhere in sight.

“Well that’s just great.”

A shuffle in the hall made me look up to see Nine. She came into the room, rubbing her eyes, dressed in footie pajamas and dragging her favorite blanket along the floor.

“Did Baby wake you?”

She nodded. “Indigo’s gone again.”

“I know,” I said. “I saw her bed hadn’t been slept in. She doesn’t even bother to stick pillows under the covers anymore.”

Nine grabbed the TV remote and turned it on. Nearly a year into this and the top news story remained the same. *Authorities in the Ukraine discovered another cell of so-called ‘splits’ living in an abandoned warehouse. The individuals were taken to Kyiv where they will await transport to a facility for the study of the anomaly.*

The anomaly. I smiled at the media-speak. Sometimes they called it a ‘temporal storm’, whatever that meant. Everyone else called it what it was: The Split.

“We’re luckier than most,” I told Nine. “At least we don’t live in one of those countries where they arrest people like us. The only thing we have to do is stay together.”

“What’ll happen to the people that got arrested?”

I looked into her big brown eyes, still sleepy at this time of night. “I don’t know.” But the truth was I could guess. For months they’d been studying The Split, and to do that, you needed to study the roughly three percent of the population that had been affected. Where we lived, things weren’t so bad. Testing was only mandatory for adults affected by The Split. For me, that had meant a blood test and monthly health checkups, which seemed a small price to pay for the possibility of getting my life back. For my splits, it meant nothing, since at a year, nine, and fifteen, they were all minors.

Elsewhere in the world, who knew what scientific horrors people like us were experiencing? I tried not to think about it most of the time. It was enough to hear about stuff like splits stealing their alpha’s identity and cleaning out their bank account, or the occasional violent assault by frustrated alphas against their splits. Whatever my problems with Indigo, at least we weren’t in that situation.

Just then I heard a soft click. Nine turned to look at me and Baby shifted in my arms a little. I waited, listening to Indigo remove her shoes for stealth. I wondered why she bothered since she hadn’t done much to cover her tracks when she’d left.

Her footsteps made no sound as she moved down the hall, until she miscalculated and put her foot down on that one squeaky floorboard. I took that as my cue to speak.

“I want my phone back.”

She came into the living room then and smirked as she put the phone down on the coffee table where I'd left it before going to bed. It didn't matter that I constantly changed my password—she was me and always figured it out eventually.

“You snuck out to meet Josh again, I assume. You know I don't like him. He's too old for you and he's only interested because he's one of those pervs who fetishizes the whole idea of splits.”

“Yeah well...you're not my mother, *Anne*.”

“I'm aware. But I am *you*, which is better. I know how stupid I could be at your age.” Even as I said it, I knew the word ‘stupid’ had been a mistake.

“Screw you!” she said. “You think you're in charge because you're the alpha, but you don't know anything.”

“The government *put* me in charge,” I said. “And may I remind you that our freedom hinges on you sticking to the rules. You can go to school, you can even hang out with friends, but after curfew you're to stay home, with the rest of us.”

She stuck her middle fingers up in tandem, then turned and walked away. Not for the first time I wondered how my parents would've handled her if they'd lived to see this. At times I thought they would've enjoyed the trip down memory lane, getting to experience me as an infant and nine-year-old again, but I think they would've passed on reliving the teenage attitude. It was karma at its most ironic that I had to deal with it.

I sighed and turned back to Nine. “You better go back to bed too. It's a school night and you'll be exhausted if you don't at least try to get some sleep.”

Nine, at least, wasn't one to argue. She shut off the TV—cutting off footage of a splits' rights demonstration in Canada—and dragged her blanket along the floor to the room she shared

with Indigo. I eased myself into as comfortable a position as I could without waking Baby and closed my eyes, but I knew I wouldn't sleep tonight. I thought instead of the day of The Split, when this had still been *my* place, and I'd been a regular thirty-year-old. I'd had a job, paid bills, taken out the trash—all that stuff you file under 'adulthood.' No one to worry about but myself. I guess that was still true, though everything had changed.

There'd been no warning. One moment I was getting ready for work, then I was doubled over with cramps until I passed out. When I came to, there they were: an infant of about two months, a little girl, and a teen. And those faces—I'd seen them countless times in mirrors and photographs, though not in years. I hadn't known what to say then, as I recognized my younger self in them, but there'd been no need as Indigo was first to break the silence with the words that had best fit the situation: "What. The. Fuck?"

#

The Nancys were sitting at our usual table at Starbucks when I arrived for our monthly meet-up. Our table was the one furthest from the window so we wouldn't feel like we were on display for curious passersby. Twenty-eight-year-old Nancy waved me over, patting the chair they'd saved, while late-fifties Nancy smiled and gave a subtle nod in greeting. As I draped my jacket over the seat back, I noticed 'Thing One' and 'Thing Two' scribbled on their cups and couldn't help but smile. This was why I liked them. Without their sense of humor, I don't know how I would've made it through the past year.

There was a cup waiting for me too. Mine read 'A.A.' which I knew stood for Alpha Annie. 'Alpha' being the scientific label assigned to the version of ourselves that existed before The Split. The initials on the cup were the Nancys' nickname for me.

"How did the poking and prodding go?" Young Nancy asked.

I shrugged. "Same old."

They nodded in unison and took a long slow sip of black coffee. I shuddered at the thought and sipped my own triple-sugar concoction.

"Okay coffee; do your thing," I said, putting the cup down.

"Baby had you up again last night?"

I nodded and gave a weak laugh. Older Nancy patted my hand.

I'd met the Nancys in the waiting room at one of my first volunteer check-ins. They were the only other people I knew personally who'd been affected by The Split. With a seven-way split, they had it worse than me. Only the two eldest Nancys qualified for testing though, and meeting for coffee afterwards had become our tradition.

I considered them both friends, but the truth was I had more in common with Younger Nancy, especially as she adjusted to modern society. Splits came into the world as if torn out of time. I still remembered how mortified Indigo had been by her out-of-fashion hair and clothing after her first day of present-day school. I'd tried to warn her, but even then, she hadn't paid me much heed. In the months since, she'd developed her own style and though I hated to admit it, she looked cooler than I ever had at fifteen. Only the attitude remained unchanged.

When Older Nancy got up to use the restroom, Younger Nancy leaned in. "She's in a mood. The dreaded ex reared his ugly head again. Wants the divorce papers signed yesterday so he can marry that barely legal bimchette he's been keeping time with."

"Did she sign?"

She shrugged. "Not yet. If it were me, I would've done it by now. I don't know what she ever saw in that guy. She needs to shed him like an old skin."

“I guess it must be hard. They were married for *a while*, and now he trades her in for a younger woman.”

“*So* cliché. It could’ve been worse though. At least he didn’t trade her in for a younger version of herself.”

We both laughed at the idea that these days that scenario was all-too-plausible, but had to get a grip as Older Nancy returned to the table.

“What did I miss?”

“We were just talking about that actress with the two-way split—Gina something?”

“Gina Birmingham,” I said.

“That’s the one. Can you believe how they’re raking it in with that reality show of theirs? I don’t get it. There’s only two of them and they’re practically the same age. They might as well be twins. What’s so special about that?”

Older Nancy shrugged, but I could tell her mind was elsewhere. I decided to share my own problems as a means to distract her.

“Indigo snuck out again last night.”

“To meet the boyfriend?”

I nodded. “I mean, what am I supposed to do? She resents my existence. I’m a disappointment to her—at best a cautionary tale, not an authority figure. I represent the future of her nightmares where she went from cool teen with an attitude to boring adult.”

“I mean, what can you do when one of your splits...well...splits?” said Younger Nancy.

That got a smile out of Older Nancy.

“When I was that age, my mom used to say she hoped I’d have a daughter just like me so I’d see what it was like,” I continued. “I used to laugh at that. I never wanted kids and knew I’d never have to deal with a daughter of my own.”

Now Younger Nancy laughed. “Oh, you sweet summer child. If only you’d known then what you know now. Guess your mom got the last laugh.”

“I’m sure wherever she is, she’s enjoying this.”

“Well, as someone who does have real children, don’t lose too much sleep over her,” said Older Nancy. “She’ll come around. Sooner or later they stop pulling away and start coming back to you.”

“I hope it works that way with splits,” I said. “Either that or that science finds a way to reverse this so it’s not an issue anymore.”

The words were out of my mouth before I realized what I was saying. Younger Nancy’s face fell for just a second before recovering, but it was enough for me to see.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean—”

She waved it off with her usual smile. “It’s fine. I know what you meant. I mean, we all know what’ll happen if they find a way to reverse this. It’s fine.”

She kept saying that word, but when my eyes met Older Nancy’s it was clear we both knew it was anything but fine with her.

#

I was still thinking about Younger Nancy a few weeks later while I waited in the car for the kids as school let out. While a big part of me wanted my life back, I also had no idea what that would mean for splits. There were theories of course; the news always had experts on talking about what reversion might be like, but no one knew for sure. I glanced at Baby in her car

seat, waving to her in the rear-view mirror to keep her happy. After a moment Nine appeared, shrugging her backpack off as she neared the car.

“Where’s Indigo?” I asked as she got in.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. She didn’t come to my class to get me.”

I turned back to face forward and wondered what this meant. Indigo—who finished school first—was supposed to take the bus from the high school to Nine’s school where they would both wait for me to pick them up. Whatever our problems, she’d never blown us off before.

I sighed. “She probably decided to walk home with friends.” What I was really thinking as I pulled away from the curb was that she’d probably gone somewhere with Josh. There was nothing I could do except hope he had her home before curfew.

#

We finished dinner with still no sign of Indigo. Then I helped Nine with her homework, struggling through the new math while yearning for the old math I’d learned at her age.

“This makes no sense,” I said. “Does any of this make sense to you?”

Nine shook her head, then as though we’d planned it, we both looked toward the clock on the wall. Less than two hours to curfew. Our eyes met again, but neither of us said a word about Indigo. The thing about splits is you never have to explain such looks—you both just get it.

“How about we take a break from math?”

“Okay.” She dropped her pencil and went over to Baby in the play yard where the two resumed an ongoing game of peek-a-boo.

As the sound of giggling filled the room, I searched for my phone. I wanted to call the Nancys to tell them about Indigo. I wanted someone to assure me it would be alright and that

she'd be home soon and in one piece—and definitely *not* pregnant, but as usual my phone was M.I.A.

I was still searching on the off chance I'd just forgotten where I put it down, when Indigo came through the door. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying, and rather than take her shoes off she just stood there staring at the rest of us and shaking. I didn't know what that bastard Josh had done to her, but I made a vow right then and there to murder him the first chance I got.

Part of me wanted to yell at her for making us worry, but I was so relieved she was home, I just ran to her and held her so tight I thought I might absorb her into me and reverse The Split all on my own. But of course, I didn't.

“What's wrong?” I asked. “Are you all right?”

She looked at me, her expression a mix of emotions, among them surprise at the realization that I might care.

“I—yeah.”

I exhaled and asked if Josh had done something to upset her.

“You haven't seen the news? Nothing online?”

“You took my phone. Besides, we've been busy with the stupid math they teach you kids nowadays. What the hell was wrong with the old math?”

She dug a hand into her jacket pocket and retrieved my phone, passing it to me with an approximation of an apologetic look.

“What should I look for?”

“Just go online. It's everywhere.”

I checked my social media. Everyone was talking about it. They'd done it. They'd found a way to reverse The Split. There'd been confirmation of a successful trial in Italy; a joint effort

between the Italians and the Dutch. The news sites said the treatment could be widely available within weeks.

My first thought was: *finally*, coupled with immense relief. Then I looked up at the eerily similar faces that surrounded me. Baby in her bassinette, oblivious to all of this. Nine, afraid and looking to me for answers to questions she couldn't bring herself to ask. And Indigo, who stared intently, seeing my smile before I could hide it.

“Good news for you, I guess. You'll finally be rid of us. You never signed up for this anyway, right?”

I wanted to deny it, but she knew me too well for that. I'd never been one for kids. I hadn't even held a babysitting job when I was younger. These girls had been forced on me by something I still didn't understand and probably never would.

“That's what I figured,” she said, in response to my pregnant pause. She stormed out of the room and Nine followed, doing her best to hold back the flood of tears until she was safely behind her bedroom door.

I glanced back down at my phone and noticed the messages I'd missed. There were nearly a dozen texts from Older Nancy, but none from Younger Nancy.

#

Over the following days I tried unsuccessfully to get a hold of the Nancys. I wanted to know how they were handling this. I wanted someone to talk to who understood, but my texts and calls went unanswered. Three weeks went by before Older Nancy texted me again, asking to meet at our usual spot at Starbucks.

She didn't tell me it would be just the two of us alphas, so I was surprised to find her sitting alone at our table. I took the lone seat across from her, automatically taking the cup left for me there, noticing it read only 'Anne,' and hers only 'Nancy.'

"They did it," she said. "I got my notice last Thursday. The appointment was yesterday morning."

I didn't have to ask what she was talking about. I thought of Young Nancy, feeling hurt that she hadn't called to say goodbye. Then I thought, what right did I have to feel cheated when she'd been—what? Erased? Of course she hadn't called.

"How did they...how was...did it..." I wasn't sure what I wanted to ask so I let the words trail away back into silence.

She placed her hand on mine. A hand with a few age spots already marring her slightly looser skin. I couldn't help it, I thought of younger Nancy and her twenty-eight-year-old hands that had been so expressive, punctuating her words with dramatic, excited gestures that had long faded from the personality of the Nancy who sat before me.

"It was alright," she said. "They let us say goodbye. It didn't hurt or anything."

I wanted to ask for details but couldn't bring myself to say the words. I was afraid of what her answers might be. I thought it best if I didn't know until I was living it; too late to turn back.

"You feel okay then," I said instead. "No regrets."

"No regrets," she repeated, but there was something in her eyes she wasn't saying.

"Nancy...tell me."

"It's fine," she said, reminding me again of the Younger Nancy. "It's fine. I have my life back. I even signed those damned divorce papers. I'm as free as can be."

I held her gaze. After a long moment, she took a sip from her coffee, stared at the name on it for a moment and then looked at me again.

“There are these memories though,” she said, finally. “Most of them are the same way they’ve always been, but in some places...it’s like there’s two sets. It’s hard to tell them apart sometimes. I feel...I don’t know.”

I nodded in understanding, though there was no way I could possibly understand. I’d find out for myself what she meant soon enough though.

#

Our number came up about two weeks after I’d met with Nancy. We hadn’t spoken since, which I was grateful for, in a way. It wasn’t the same without Younger Nancy, and I think we both felt that. In the meantime, life had gone on as it had for the past year-and-a-half. Then a phone notification changed everything. The appointment was set for the following Tuesday.

I wasn’t sure how to break the news to the girls, but as usual they could read me with an ease that made it unnecessary.

“When?” was all Indigo asked.

“Next Tuesday at four.”

A single nod. “On the bright side, you won’t have to worry about Josh anymore.”

She smiled but there was no joy in it. No one else smiled with her. Not even Baby, unaware of all this as she played with a shape sorter on the floor.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I blurted. “You remember my friend Nancy? She had it done, and she said it doesn’t hurt. She said she has their memories. They’re not gone, they’re still with her. You’ll be with me too. All the experiences you’ve had this year, they’ll be with me forever as if they’d happened to me at your ages.”

I wanted to scream at myself to shut up. Even I wasn't buying this, but I rambled on while they said nothing, save Baby who repeated the word 'Mama' over and over as she played. As I spoke, I looked at each of them in turn—the happy baby I once was; Nine who'd taken to wearing her hair in braids like I had at her age; and Indigo, a young woman, but still so much a kid, trying to fake a strength I knew she wouldn't have for years to come. They just sat there looking at me—looking *to* me—waiting for me to make everything okay.

They shouldn't even exist, I told myself. Yet here they were, as real as I ever was.

"Fuck this," I said, so suddenly that both Nine and Indigo gasped before bursting into nervous laughter. "We're not doing this. Girls, pack your bags."

"What? But we don't have a choice," said Indigo. "It's the law."

"Since when are you so concerned about the law?"

"They'll come after us," she argued. "You'll be giving up more than you already have. I thought you wanted your life like it was."

"So did I."

I didn't wait for them to understand and they didn't ask for further explanation. I headed to my room and packed a suitcase for myself, then to the nursery where I grabbed everything we'd need for Baby. By then Nine and Indigo had finished packing and I got them to help me gather anything else that might help us get by for a while. We didn't talk much, but the mood seemed lighter somehow.

Only when the car was loaded with our things and we were sitting in our seats, did I pause to consider a destination.

"I don't know where to go," I laughed. "Any ideas?"

Indigo slouched in the seat next to me and propped her feet up on the dashboard.

“South?” she suggested, before blowing a huge pink gum bubble and popping it with her fingernail.

“Wherever we’re going, can we stop for ice cream first?” Nine asked.

Indigo and I exchanged a look and smiled. I turned back toward Nine, who was making funny faces at Baby.

“Sure, why not? But if anyone asks, we’re sisters, got it? Except for you Baby, you can just go on calling me Mama.”

“I hope they have mint chocolate chip. It’s my favorite!” said Nine.

“Mine too,” Indigo and I echoed.

I turned the key in the ignition, and Baby let out an excited squeal as if she understood what was going on. I checked the rear-view mirror just long enough to back out of the driveway, then focused on the road ahead. For us, there’d be no going back.

End