

*Code Orange*  
by Caroline B. Cooney

It was an envelope.

The envelope was rectangular, an odd size, maybe six inches long and two inches wide. It was mustard yellow, its color preserved by the darkness inside the book. It was labeled on one side. With a fountain pen, someone had written Scabs- VM epidemic, 1902, Boston.

The envelope was not and never had been sealed. It was closed with a thin string wound around a stiff paper button. Mitty undid the string and peered in, but the opening was narrow and he couldn't see exactly what was down there. He inverted the envelope over his hand and tapped. The contents slid into his palm.

The stuff really was scabs.

Mitty rubbed one dark crust of old blood between his fingers. It crumbled. Mitty sneezed. The energy of his sneeze made his fingers tighten around the remaining crusts. When he released his grip, only one scab remained intact. It was darker than the rest, almost black. He dropped the crumbles back in the envelope, dusted his hands briskly and held the dark scab between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. His nose itched. Mitty rubbed his nose with the back of his hand to prevent a second sneeze.

He sniffed the scab. It seemed to have a slight odor, but perhaps that was just the scent of age.

Mitty was not familiar with VM, but it occurred to him that if VM could cause an epidemic, it had to be an infectious disease. Mitty brightened. He didn't care if VM had a common name, a long history or a current event. He didn't care if it had ever shown up in New York City or could be used by bioterrorists. He cared only that he had his topic.

First he had figure out what VM stood for.

Variola major is a virus.

A virus is not precisely a living creature. It has no system for the intake of food or oxygen. It has no personality, no brain. It has one task: to take over the cells of other creatures.

Scab particles were in Mitty Blake's fingerprints. He had wiped them on his cheek and rubbed them against his nose. He had breathed them in.

Every virus, although not quite alive, nevertheless has a shelf “life”. The shelf life of some viruses is known; the shelf life of others is uncertain.

In this case, it was the shelf life of Mitchell John Blake that was uncertain.