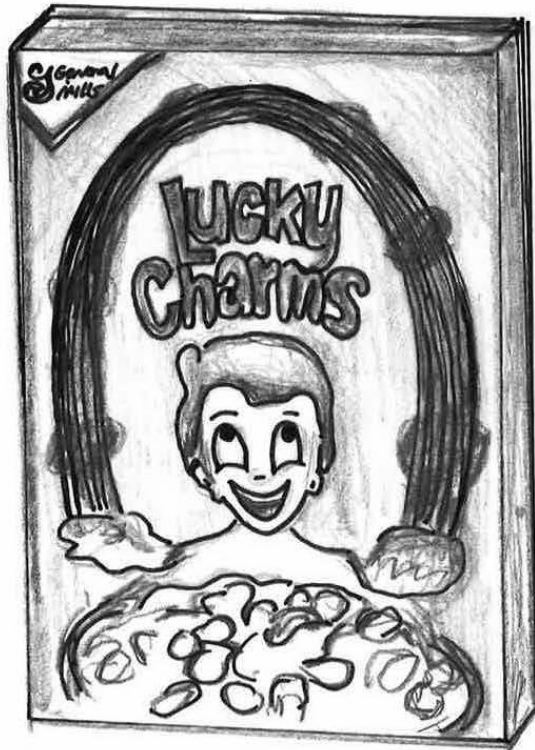


PO-TAY-TO/PO-TAH-TO



*I've received boxes of Lucky Charms for joke birthday presents, and I've been kissed by random strangers on St. Patty's Day.*

I pick up a white box with colorful imagery of DNA. The middle of the box reads,

*Welcome to you.*

Had I never met me?

A family member gave me the kit as a gift, and I couldn't help but think I was entering into some kind of spit-collecting pyramid scheme. After a person buys a kit, 23andMe tries to sell that consumer additional kits at discount.

"Buy 23andMe for the entire family and discover more connections."

Connections for me meant talking some distant relative in the middle of Europe into letting me crash on their sofa for free. At least, that's what 23andMe commercials promise. My long-lost distant cousin might have a mustache or a funny hat, but we'll hug with the affection only two people who share chromosomes can feel.

Inside the box is a plastic tube for saliva. I search the 23andMe website to register my mouth juices, and I find out the profile will include, among other things, ethnicity percentages, and ancestral matches. On the 23andMe homepage, a picture of a young woman appears with a long chart of multiple ethnicities and a variety of percentages next to her face. Her skin is light brown with freckles scattered across her skinny nose. Her dark hair is styled in an Afro, and her green eyes shine like translucent pigment in blown glass. I think to myself, *maybe I am just as genetically interesting as her.*

Is it a strange thing to be genetically jealous? To want to have what someone else has, chromosomally speaking? Is

being genetically jealous simply what I feel when I wish to have wavy hair, or at least to be someone not so pale, white-skinned, redheaded, brown-eyed, with an average height and skinny body type and a last name so synonymous with Irish decent that my mind feels like a dumpster of jokes about being Irish from other people laid at me in the hope that I might fake an Irish accent for them or dance a jig when I'm drunk.

*Can I buy you a Guinness?*

People have given me Irish flags, four-leaf clover keychains, leprechaun shirts, and journals with Celtic knot imprints. I've received boxes of Lucky Charms for joke birthday presents, and I've been kissed by random strangers on St. Patty's Day. I have been asked multiple times if I get mean when I drink, and I've dated a woman whose mom warned her about Irish temperament, poverty, and alcoholism.

Maybe genetic jealousy creates the same desire that puts a fake indigenous princess in a family book without thought of the historical bullshit of doing such a thing. I remember my dad believed he had "Indian blood" because he liked to go camping and walk barefoot.

When my Irish-ness is brought up through jest or by glances after James Joyce is referenced, I would be nice to say with some authority that "I'm not *just* Irish."

I get on the 23andMe website a few days later, and I still haven't registered. Even though I want to prove myself as something else besides Irish, I'm hesitant to give my spit to them along with the implicit power to infer Me from DNA.

This time on the website, a white woman with long straight blonde hair and a bulbous nose smiles towards some text. She's wearing a sweater and a beanie.

*Everyone has a DNA story. What is your story? [shop now]*

Behind her is a number.

*"Scandinavian 34.5%"*

How is a percentage a story?

Here's another percentage: 99.9% of your DNA is similar to everyone else. But of course, it's the promise of meaning from that .1% difference between us that people pay to have their DNA sequenced. Even with all our genetics codified, categorized, compared, analyzed, and represented, doesn't the story of me come after my genes are interpreted, not before?

I once stayed with this embodiment of ancestral storytelling, and he might agree that genetics equate to story. He was a friend of a friend, and had offered us lodging while we explored New York City. He had a large red beard with red hair trimmed short and monkish. He was six-foot-five, and his body was a series of rounded hills of muscle.

"Another red head," he said to me with a booming voice when we met. He shook my hand and squeezed it hard. "I bet everyone thinks you're Irish, huh?"

I've probably used this same line with others who carry two recessive allele copies on their number 16 chromosome.

"I'm a Viking," he said, unprompted. "My family is from Denmark. Some great-ancestor way back." He thumbed over his shoulder into history. He wore a sleeveless shirt, and on one bicep was a tattoo with Nordic letters wrapped around his arm.

He asked me where my red hair was from. To avoid the heritage-games, I told him I didn't know. His eyes ran up and down my comparatively scrawny body.

"What's your last name?"

"Kelley."

A knowing smile spread across his lips. "Irish!"

At night we laid in separate beds four-feet across from one another. Before he turned out the light, he showed me a poster of his family crest on the wall. Family crests not side-by-side always look the same to me. Do they always have a castle?

If I had a family crest of the ancestors I truly know, it would include a can of Budweiser, a Mormon beehive with a cloaked figure sneaking inside, a belt, and to represent just how Irish my

family is, in my mind — that damn box of Lucky Charms. Under the icons would be the family motto: *Don't be a fool, wrap your tool.*

"Are you dating anyone?" Mr. Viking asked from the dark.

"I'm not," I said. The silence hung a bit uncomfortable, like he was expecting me to elaborate. I waited, and then asked if he were in a relationship.

"A gorgeous redhead," he said. He showed me a picture of her from his phone. "I would love to have redheaded kids," he said. "Wouldn't you?"

"I haven't thought much about kids, or their hair. I guess it would be nice to stand next to another redhead from my family so that when strangers ask if we're related that it would finally be true."

I told him about a woman with red hair I often went out with. Every time we were asked, we made up fake family histories.

*We only found out we had the same father a week ago.*

*We're twins. Can't you tell?*

*We're cousins, but we grew up in the same house because our parents thought all of the redheads should live together.*

Mr. Viking chuckled. "Random people ask my girlfriend and I all the time if she's my sister. I think people wonder, until they see us hold hands or kiss."

"Or maybe they still wonder," I said.

We laughed, and when we went quiet and I was ready to be done with the night, he said, "I think it's best to stick to your type, you know?"

"Like hair color?" I playfully asked, thinking he was about to go off about personality or astrology.

"Even if she wasn't a redhead I'd still date her because she's of Scandinavian descent, like me."

I stopped laughing. Clearly hair color or personality was not what he meant by *type*.

"I'm not a racist," he said. "I'm just proud of my heritage. I feel like people of the same heritage belong to one another. It

keeps their own culture alive. If people just end up with whoever from wherever, it actually makes the world less diverse because all these heritages get lost in the mixing."

I let the remark hover in the dark and remain unanswered. This was a mistake, and I felt it while I waited for the morning. I like to think that if I had been older, I would have challenged him by using Socratic digging to take out the seeds of a racist logic from his mind. Now, nearly ten years later, I wonder what became of him as his worldview plays out in places like Charlottesville where white marchers chanted, "You will not replace us" — a reference to their pseudo-sociological belief that they are under threat of cultural genocide.

If Mr. Viking is single today, he's in luck. Dating services and forums have already popped up based on genetic testing. He would have to decide if someone like the model with 34.5% Scandinavian DNA was enough for him, or if he needed to see her other ratios to make a final decision to ask her out on a date. If he had the chance, would he have asked his girlfriend to get her DNA sequenced?

*I love you, but, I just want to make sure.*

The 23andMe kit was given to me as a gift, but giving my genetic information to a company worries me. Some days when I think about all that Google and Facebook have on me, I feel like I'm one targeted advertisement away from moving to an offline shack in the Idaho mountains. Genetic advertisers that know my potential for health conditions and diseases could market wonder pills, health programs, or sunscreen to me that sound scientifically curated. If these advertisers know my heritage, they might even try to send ads of Irish paraphernalia and decorations.

The world wants to define us, or at least to have us select a pre-fab definition. When we are defined and when we believe in that definition, we can be marketed to by corporations, political groups, and by potential sexual partners. The more we fit into a

category, and the more people can be moved into a category, the more effective and efficient those marketers become.

And being defined, genetically, also makes the horrors of eugenics, nationalism, and ethnic persecution or disenfranchisement easier, especially if our information is available and searchable. The more our bodies become digitized knowledge, the more we are at risk for being targeted for nefarious reasons. There are reasons beyond privacy for why I did not want to have my genes sequenced. I don't always want to know my ancestry. Ancestry can be confused with fate and the mere knowledge of being from a particular lineage could subconsciously play on how I see myself or my family. But genetic knowledge might also challenge a false heritage that an identity is based on. Red hair and freckly skin are not just phenotypes of genes that are passed down from Celts or even Western Europeans. My hair and skin could be from an original genetic mutation, one that can occur in any ethnicity. There are African redheads, Polynesian redheads, and redheads from South America and Asia.

In 23andMe advertisements, people find out they have ancestral DNA that makes them seek out and learn more about those other ethnicities. This is the hope— that knowledge of our ancestry makes us respect human diversity and history more. The chances of someone being purely of one ethnicity, or even of a group of ethnicities that are associated with a color of skin, is so slight, that it rocks the myths of race for people like Mr. Viking.

*I'm only 34.5% Scandinavian? Fuck.*

And not all Scandinavians were Vikings.

Americans can be historically naïve, and genetic testing could positively challenge our personal histories and national consciousness. Let the past be the past, some say, but this might be impossible to mutter with a weightless heart after a genetic test links someone to a perpetrator of a historical injustice.

In one of the many family stories that I distrust, my racist grandfather told me that someone in our direct family line owned

a slave plantation in Nashville that was burned down during the Civil War. There are no records or evidence, supposedly, because the courthouse that stored them was also burned by Union soldiers. Does the story mean I have a duty to find out the facts? How much burden would I face because of my lineage, if it is true? Would the 23andMe test even be able to shed light on this time in my ancestral history, or would it continue to be an undocumented gap?

I could throw these questions away and not hold myself responsible for what my ancestors might have done, but I also shouldn't need a genetic test to accept and reckon with the truth that those of white heritage have benefited more from their white skin than others have from their darker skins. I don't know if a genetic test will reveal just how many racists and how deep the racism runs in my ancestry, but it does terrify me a bit to know for certain with the ancestral tools being developed by 23andMe that could show that I'm the direct descendent of a slave owner.

My grandpa told the story with pride, and all I had was disgust. Maybe I should be equally disgusted with myself that in the back of my mind, I have a desire to disbelieve it without any counter evidence.

In the morning, I open up the 23andMe box and remind myself of an old saying: You shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. At the bathroom mirror, I push my red hair across my pale forehead and I wonder to what ends, if any, I will use the results.

I take out the spit tube, and fill it up.