

N-WORDS

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They came from test tubes. They came pale as ghosts with eyes as blue-white as glacier ice. They came first out of Korea.

I try to picture David's face in my head, but I can't. They've told me this is temporary—a kind of shock that happens sometimes when you've seen a person die that way. Although I try to picture David's face, it's only his pale eyes I can see.

My sister squeezes my hand in the back of the limo. "It's almost over," she says.

Up the road, against the long, wrought iron railing, the protestors grow excited as our procession approaches. They're standing in the snow on both sides of the cemetery gates, men and women wearing hats and gloves and looks of righteous indignation, carrying signs I refuse to read.

My sister squeezes my hand again. Before today I had not seen her in almost four years. But today she helped me pick out my black dress. She helped me with my stockings and my shoes. She helped me dress my son, who is not yet three, and who doesn't like ties—and who is now sleeping on the seat across from us without any understanding of what he's lost.

"Are you going to be okay?" my sister asks.

"No," I say. "I don't think I am."

The limo slows as it turns onto cemetery property, and the mob rushes in, shouting obscenities. Protestors push against the sides of the vehicle.

"You aren't wanted here!" someone shouts, and then an old man's face is against the glass, his eyes wild. "God's will be done!" he shrieks. "For the wages of sin is death."

The limo rocks under the press of the crowd, and the driver accelerates until we are past them, moving up the slope toward the other cars.

"What's wrong with them?" my sister whispers.

"What kind of people would do that on a day like today?"

You'd be surprised, I think. Maybe your neighbors. Maybe mine. But I look out the window and say nothing. I've gotten used to saying nothing.

SHE'D SHOWN UP at my house this morning a little after 6:00. I'd opened the door, and she stood there in the cold, and neither of us spoke, neither of us sure what to say after so long.

"I heard about it on the news," she said finally. "I came on the next plane. I'm so sorry, Mandy."

There are things I wanted to say then—things that welled up inside of me like a bubble ready to burst, and I opened my mouth to scream at her, but what came out belonged to a different person: it came out a pathetic sob, and she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me, my sister again after all these years.

The limo slows near the top of the hill, and the procession tightens. Headstones crowd the roadway. I see the tent up ahead, green; its canvas sides billow in and out with the wind, like a giant's breathing. Two-dozen gray folding chairs crouch in straight rows beneath it.

The limo stops.

"Should we wake the boy?" my sister asks.

"I don't know."

"Do you want me to carry him?"

"Can you?"

She looks at the child. "He's only three?"

"No," I say. "Not yet."

"He's big for his age. I mean, isn't he? I'm not around kids much."

"The doctors say he's big."

My sister leans forward and touches his milky white cheek. "He's beautiful," she says. I try not to hear the surprise in her voice. People are never aware of that tone when they use it, revealing what their expectations had been. But I'm past being offended by what people reveal unconsciously. Now it's only intent that offends. "He really is beautiful," she says again.

"He's his father's son," I say.

Ahead of us, people climb from their cars. The priest is walking toward the grave.

"It's time," my sister says. She opens the door and we step out into the cold.

THEY CAME FIRST out of Korea. But that's wrong, of course. History has an order to its telling. It would be more accurate to say it started in Britain. After all it was Harding who published first; it was Harding who shook the world with his announcement. And it was Harding who the religious groups burned in effigy on their church lawns.

Only later did the Koreans reveal they'd accomplished the same goal two years before, and the proof was already out of diapers. And it was only later, much later, that the world would recognize the scope of what they'd done.

When the Yeong Bae fell to the People's Party, the Korean labs were emptied, and there were suddenly *thousands* of them—little blond and red-haired orphans, pale as ghosts, starving on the Korean streets as society crumbled around them. The ensuing wars and regime changes destroyed much of the supporting scientific data—but the children themselves, the ones who survived, were incontrovertible. There was no mistaking what they were.

It was never fully revealed why the Yeong Bae had developed the project in the first place. Perhaps they'd been after a better soldier. Or perhaps they'd done it for the oldest reason: because they could.

What is known for certain is that in 2001 disgraced stem cell biologist Hwang Woo-Suk cloned the world's first dog, an afghan. In 2006, he revealed that he'd tried and failed to clone a mammoth on three separate occasions. Western labs had talked about it, but the Koreans had actually tried. This would prove to be the pattern.

In 2011 the Koreans finally succeeded, and a mammoth was born from an elephant surrogate. Other labs followed. Other species. The Pallid Beach Mouse. The Pyrenean Ibex. And older things. Much older. The best scientists in the US had to leave the country to do their work. US laws against stem cell research didn't stop scientific advancement; it only stopped it from occurring in the US. Instead, Britain, China, and India won patents for the procedures. Cancers were cured. Most forms of blindness, MS, and Parkinson's. When Congress eventually legalized the medical procedures, but not the lines of research which lead to them, the hypocrisy was too much, and even the

most loyal American cyto-researchers left the country.

Harding was among this final wave, leaving the United States to set up a lab in the UK. In 2013, he was the first to bring back the Thylacine. In the winter of 2015, someone brought him a partial skull from a museum exhibit. The skull was doliocephalic—long, low, large. The bone was heavy, the cranial vault enormous—part of a skullcap that had been found in 1857 in a quarry in the Neander valley.

SNOW CRUNCHES UNDER our feet as my sister and I move outside the limo. The wind is freezing, and my legs grow numb in my thin slacks. It is fitting he is being buried on a day like today; David was never bothered by the cold.

My sister gestures toward the limo's open door. "Are you sure you want to bring the boy? I could stay with him in the car."

"He should be here," I say. "He should see it."

"He won't understand."

"No, but later he might remember he was here," I say. "Maybe that will matter."

"He's too young to remember."

"He remembers everything." I lean into the shadows and wake the boy. His eyes open like blue lights. "Come, Sean, it's time to wake up."

He rubs a pudgy fist into his eyes and says nothing. He is a quiet boy, my son. Out in the cold, I pull a hat down over his ears. The boy walks between my sister and me, holding our hands.

At the top of the hill, Dr. Michaels is there to greet us, along with other faculty from Stanford. They offer their condolences, and I work hard not to break down. Dr. Michaels looks like he hasn't slept. I introduce my sister and hands are shaken.

"You never mentioned you had a sister," he says.

I only nod. Dr. Michaels looks down at the boy and tugs the child's hat.

"Do you want me to pick you up?" he asks.

"Yeah." Sean's voice is small and scratchy from sleep. It is not an odd voice for a boy his age. It is a normal voice. Dr. Michaels lifts him, and the child's blue eyes close again.

We stand in silence in the cold. Mourners gather around the grave.

"I still can't believe it," Dr. Michaels says. He's swaying slightly, unconsciously rocking the boy. It is something only a man who has been a father would do, though his own children are grown.

"It's like I'm another person now," I say. "Only I haven't learned how to be her yet."

My sister grabs my hand, and this time I do break down. The tears burn in the cold.

The priest clears his throat; he's about to begin. In the distance the sounds of protestors grows louder, the rise and fall of their chants not unpleasant—though from this distance, thankfully, I cannot make out the words.

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WHEN THE WORLD first learned of the Korean children, it sprang into action. Humanitarian groups swooped into the war-torn area, monies exchanged hands, and many of the children were adopted out to other countries—a new worldwide Diaspora. They were broad, thick-limbed children; usually slightly shorter than average, though there were startling exceptions to this.

They looked like members of the same family, and some of them, assuredly, were more closely related than that. There were more children, after all, than there were fossil specimens from which they'd derived. Duplicates were inevitable.

From what limited data remained of the Koreans' work, there had been more than sixty different DNA sources. Some even had names: the Old Man La Chappelle aux Saints, Shanidar IV and Vindija. There was the handsome and symmetrical La Ferrassie specimen. And even Amud I. *Huge* Amud I, who had stood 1.8 meters tall and had a cranial capacity of 1740ccs—the largest Neanderthal ever found.

The techniques perfected on dogs and mammoths had worked easily, too, within the genus *Homo*. Extraction, then PCR to amplify. After that came IVF with paid surrogates. The success rate was high, the only complication frequent cesarean births. And that was one of the things popular culture had to absorb, that Neanderthal heads were larger.

Tests were done. The children were studied and tracked and evaluated. All lacked normal dominant ex-

pression at the MC1R locus—all were pale-skinned, freckled, with red or blonde hair. All were blue-eyed. All were Rh negative.

I was six years old when I first saw a picture. It was the cover of *Time*—what is now a famous cover. I'd heard about these children but had never seen one—these children who were almost my age, from a place called Korea; these children that were sometimes called ghosts.

The magazine showed a pale, red-haired Neanderthal boy standing with his adoptive parents, staring thoughtfully up at an outdated anthropology display at a museum. The wax Neanderthal man in the display carried a club. He had a nose from the tropics, dark hair, olive-brown skin and dark brown eyes. Before Harding's child, the museum display designers had supposed they knew what primitive looked like, and they had supposed it was decidedly swarthy.

Never mind that Neanderthals had spent ten times longer in light-starved Europe than a typical Swede's ancestors.

The redheaded boy on the cover wore a confused expression.

When my father walked into the kitchen and saw the *Time* cover, he shook his head in disgust. "It's an abomination," he said.

I studied the boy's jutting face. I'd never seen anyone with face like that. "Who is he?"

"A dead-end. Those kids are going to be a drain for the rest of their lives. It's not fair to them, really."

That was the first of many pronouncements I'd hear about the children.

Years passed and the children grew like weeds—and as with all populations, the first generation exposed to a western diet grew several inches taller than their ancestors. While they excelled at sports, their adopted families were told they could be slow learners. They were primitive after all.

A prediction which turned out to be as accurate as the museum displays.

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WHEN I LOOK up, the priest's hands are raised into the cold, white sky. "Blessed are you, O God our father; praised be your name forever." He breathes smoke, reading from the Book of Tobit.

It is a passage I've heard at both funerals and marriage ceremonies, and this, like the cold on this day, is fitting. "Let the heavens and all your creations praise you forever."

The mourners sway in the giant's breathing of the tent.

I was born Catholic, but found little use for organized religion in my adulthood. Little use for it, until now, when its use is so clearly revealed—and it is an unexpected comfort to be part of something larger than yourself; it is a comfort to have someone to bury your dead.

Religion provides a man in black to speak words over your loved one's grave. It does this first. If it does not do this, it is not religion.

"You made Adam and you gave him your wife Eve to be his love and support; and from these two, the human race descended."

They said together, *Amen, Amen.*

THE DAY I learned I was pregnant, David stood at our window, huge, pale arms draped over my shoulders. He touched my stomach as we watched a storm coming in across the lake.

"I hope the baby looks like you," he said in his strange, nasal voice.

"I don't."

"No, it would be easier if the baby looks like you. He'll have an easier life."

"He?"

"I think it's a boy."

"And is that what you'd wish for him, to have an easy life?"

"Isn't that what every parent wishes for?"

"No," I said. I touched my own stomach. I put my small hand over his large one. "I hope our son grows to be a good man."

I'D MET DAVID at Stanford when he walked into class five minutes late.

He had arms like legs. And legs like torsos. His torso was the trunk of an oak—seventy-five years old, grown in the sun. A full-sleeve tattoo swarmed up one bulging, ghost-pale arm, disappearing under his shirt. He had an earring in one ear, and a shaved head. A thick red goatee balanced the enormous bulk of his convex nose and gave some dimension to his receding chin. The eyes beneath his thick brows were large and intense—as blue as a husky's.

It wasn't that he was handsome, because I couldn't decide if he was. It was that I couldn't take my eyes off him. I stared at him. All the girls stared at him.

It was harder for them to get into graduate programs back then. There were quotas—and like Asians, they had to score better to get accepted.

There was much debate over what name should go next to the race box on their entrance forms. The word "Neanderthal" had evolved into an epithet over the previous decade. It became just another N-word polite society didn't use.

I'd been to the clone rights rallies. I'd heard the speakers. "The French don't call themselves Cro-Magnons, do they?" the loudspeakers boomed.

And so the name by their box had changed every few years, as the college entrance questionnaires strove to map the shifting topography of political correctness. Every few years, a new name for the group would arise—and then a few years later sink again under the accumulated freight of prejudice heaped upon it.

They were called Neanderthals at first, then archaics, then clones—then, ridiculously, they were called simply Koreans, since that was the country in which all but one of them had been born. Sometime after the word "Neanderthal" became an epithet, there was a movement by some militants within the group to reclaim the word, to use it within the group as a sign of strength.

But over time, the group gradually came to be known exclusively by a name that had been used occasionally from the very beginning, a name which captured the hidden heart of their truth. Among their own kind, and finally, among the rest of the world, they came to be known as the ghosts. All the other names fell away, and here, finally, was a name that stayed.

IN 2033, THE first ghost was drafted into the NFL. He spoke three languages. By 2035, the front line of every team in the league had one—*had* to have one, to be competitive. In the 2036 Olympics, ghosts took gold in wrestling, in power lifting, in almost every event in which they were entered. Some individuals took golds in multiple sports, in multiple areas.

There was an outcry from the other athletes who could not hope to compete. There were petitions to have ghosts banned from competition. It was suggested they should have their own Olympics, distinct from the original. Lawyers for the ghosts pointed out, carefully, tactfully, that out of the fastest 400 times recorded for the 100 yard dash, 386 had been achieved by persons of at least partial sub-Saharan African descent, and nobody was suggesting *they* get their own Olympics.

Of course, racist groups like the KKK and the neo-Nazis actually liked the idea, and proposed just that. Blacks, too, should compete against their own kind, get their own Olympics. After that, the whole matter degenerated into chaos.

WHEN I WAS growing up, I helped my grandfather prune his apple trees in Indiana. The trick, he told me, was telling which branches helped the fruit, and which branches didn't. Once you've studied a tree, you got a sense of what was important. Everything else you could cut away as useless baggage.

You can discard your ethnic identity through a similar process of careful ablation. You look at your child's face, and you don't wonder whose side you're on. You know.

I read in a sociology book that when someone in the privileged majority marries a minority, they take on the so-

cial status of that minority group. It occurred to me how the universe is a series of concentric circles, and you keep seeing the same shapes and processes wherever you look. Atoms are little solar systems; highways are a nation's arteries, streets its capillaries—and the social system of humans follows Mendelian genetics, with dominants and recessives. Minority ethnicity is the dominant gene when part of a heterozygous couple.

THERE ARE MANY Neanderthal bones in the Field Museum.

Their bones are different than ours. It is not just their big skulls, or their short, powerful limbs; virtually every bone in their body is thicker, stronger, heavier. Each vertebrae, each phalange, each small bone in the wrist, is thicker than ours. And I have wondered sometimes, when looking at those bones, why they need skeletons like that. All that metabolically expensive bone and muscle and brain. It had to be paid for. What kind of life makes you need bones like chunks of rebar? What kind of life makes you need a sternum half an inch thick?

During the Pleistocene, glaciers had carved their way south across Europe, isolating animal populations behind a curtain of ice. Those populations either adapted to the harsh conditions, or they died. Over time, the herd animals grew massive, becoming more thermally efficient; and so began the age of the Pleistocene mega-fauna. The predators too, had to adapt. The saber-tooth cat, the cave bear. They grew more powerful in order to bring down the larger prey. What was true for other animals was true for genus *Homo*, nature's experiment, the Neanderthal—the region's ultimate climax predator.

THREE DAYS AGO, the day David died, I woke to an empty bed. I found him naked at the window in our living room, looking out into the winter sky, his leonine face wrapped in shadow.

From behind, I could see the V of his back against the gray light. I knew better than to disturb him. He became a

silhouette against the sky, and in that instant, he was something more and less than human—like some broad human creature adapted for life in extreme gravity. A person built to survive stresses that would crush a normal man.

He turned look at me. "There's a storm coming today," he said.

THE DAY DAVID died, I woke to an empty bed. I wonder about that.

I wonder if he suspected something. I wonder what got him out of bed early. I wonder at the storm he mentioned, the one he said was coming.

If he'd known the risk, we never would have gone to the rally—I'm sure of that, because he was a cautious man. But I wonder if some hidden, inner part of him didn't have its ear to the railroad tracks; I wonder if some part of him didn't feel the ground shaking, didn't hear the freight train barreling down on us all.

We ate breakfast that morning. We drove to the babysitter's and dropped off our son. David kissed him on the cheek and tousled his hair. There was no last look, no sense this would be the final time. David kissed the boy, tousled his hair, and then we were out the door, Mary waving goodbye.

We drove to the hall in silence. We parked our car in the crowded lot, ignoring the counter-rally already forming across the street.

We shook hands with other guests and found our way to the assigned table. It was supposed to be a small luncheon, a civilized affair between moneyed men in expensive suits. David was the second speaker.

Up on the podium, David's expression changed. Before his speeches, there was this moment, this single second, where he glanced out over the crowd, and his eyes grew sad.

David closed his eyes, opened them, and spoke. He began slowly. He spoke of the flow of history and the symmetry of nature. He spoke of the arrogance of ignorance; and in whispered tones, he spoke of fear. "And out of fear," he said. "grows hatred." He let his eyes wander over the crowd. "They hate us because we're different," he said, voice rising for the first time. "Always it works this way, wherever you look in history. And always we must work

against it. We must never give in to violence. But we are right to fear, my friends. We must be vigilant, or we'll lose everything we've gained for our children, and our children's children." He paused.

I'd heard this speech before, or parts of it. David rarely used notes, preferring to pull the speeches out of his head, assembling an oratorical structure both delicate and profound. He continued for another ten minutes before finally going into his close.

"They've talked about restricting us from athletic competition. They've eliminated us from receiving most scholarships. They've limited our attendance of law schools, and medical schools, and PhD programs. These are the soft shackles they've put upon us, and we cannot sit silently and let it happen."

The crowd erupted into applause. David lifted his hands to silence them and he walked back to his seat. Other speakers took the podium, but none with David's eloquence. None with his power.

When the last speaker sat, dinner was brought out and we ate. An hour later, when the plates were clean, more hands were shaken, and people started filing out to their cars. The evening was over.

David and I took our time, talking with old friends, but we eventually worked our way into the lobby. Ahead of us, out in the parking lot, there was a commotion. The counter-rally had grown. Somebody mentioned vandalized cars, and then Tom was leaning into David's ear, whispering as we passed through the front doors and out into the open air.

It started with thrown eggs. Thomas turned, egg-white drooling down his broad chest. The fury in his eyes was enough to frighten me. David rushed forward and grabbed his arm. There was a look of surprise on some of the faces in the crowd, because even they hadn't expected anybody to throw things—and I could see, too, the group of young men, clumped together near the side of the building, eggs in hand, mouths open—and it was like time stopped, because the moment was fat and waiting—and it could go any way, and an egg came down out of the sky that was not an egg, but a rock, and it struck Sarah Mitchell

in the face—and the blood was red and shocking on her ghost-white skin, and the moment was wide open, time snapping back the other way—everything moving too fast, all of it happening at the same time instead of taking turns the way events are supposed to. And suddenly David's grip on my arm was a vise, physically lifting me, pulling me back toward the building, and I tried to keep my feet while someone screamed.

"Everybody go back inside!" David shouted. And then another woman screamed, a different kind of noise, like a shout of warning—and then I heard it, a shout that was a roar like nothing I'd ever heard before—and then more screams, men's screams. And somebody lunged from the crowd and swung at David, and he moved so quickly I was flung away, the blow missing David's head by a foot.

"No!" David yelled at the man. "We don't want this."

Then the man swung again and this time David caught the fist in his huge hand. He jerked the man close. "We're not doing this," he hissed and flung him back into the crowd.

David grabbed Tom's arm again, trying to guide him back toward the building. "This is stupid, don't be pulled into it."

Thomas growled and let himself be pulled along, and someone spit in his face, and I saw it, the dead look in his eyes, to be spit on and do nothing. And still David pulled us toward the safety of the building, brushing aside the curses of men whose necks he could snap. And still he did nothing. He did nothing all the way up to the end, when a thin, balding forty-year-old man stepped into his path, raised a gun, and fired point blank into his chest.

THE BLAST WAS deafening.

—and that old sadness gone. Replaced by white-hot rage and disbelief, blue eyes wide.

People tried to scatter, but the crush of bodies prevented it. David hung there, in the crush, looking down at his chest. The man fired three more times before David fell.

"ASHES TO ASHES, dust to dust. Accept our brother David into your warm embrace." The priest lowers his

hands and closes the bible. The broad casket is lowered into the ground. It is done.

Dr. Michaels carries the boy as my sister helps me back to the limo.

THE NIGHT DAVID was killed, after the hospital and the police questions, I drove to the sitter's to pick up my son. Mary hugged me and we stood crying in the foyer for a long time.

"What do I tell my two-year old?" I said. "How do I explain this?"

We walked to the front room, and I stood in the doorway. I watched my son like I was seeing him for the first time. He was blocky, like his father, but his bones were longer. He was a gifted child who knew his letters and could already sound out certain words.

And that was our secret, that he was not yet three and already learning to read. And there were thousands more like him—a new generation, the best of two tribes.

Perhaps David's mistake was that he hadn't realized there was a war. In any war, there are only certain people who fight it—and a smaller number who understand, truly, *why* it's being fought. This was no different.

Sixty thousand years ago, there were two walks of men in the world. There were the people of the ice, and there were the people of the sun.

When the climate warmed, the ice sheets retreated. The broad African desert was beaten back by the rains, and the people of the sun expanded north.

The world was changing then. The European megafauna were disappearing. The delicate predator/prey equilibrium slipped out of balance and the world's most deadly climax predator found his livelihood evaporating in warming air. Without the big herds, there was less food. The big predators gave way to sleeker models that needed fewer calories to survive.

The people of the sun weren't stronger, or smarter, or better than the people of the ice; Cain didn't kill his brother, Abel. The snow people didn't die out because they weren't good enough. All that bone and muscle and brain. They died because they were too expensive.

But now the problems are different. Now the world

has changed again. Again there are two kinds of men in the world. But in this new age, it will not be the economy version of man who wins.

THE LIMO DOOR slams shut. The vehicle pulls away from the grave. As we near the cemetery gates, the shouting grows louder. The protestors see us coming.

The police said that David's murder was a crime of passion. Others said he was a target of opportunity. I don't know which is true. The truth died with the shooter, when Tom crushed his skull with a single right-hand blow.

The shouting spikes louder as we pass the cemetery gates. A snowball smashes into the window.

"Stop the car!" I shout.

I fling open the door. I climb out and walk up to the surprised man. He's standing there, another snowball already packed in his hands. I'm not sure what I'm going to do as I approach him. I've gotten used to the remarks, the small attacks. I've gotten used to ignoring them. I've gotten used to saying nothing.

I slap him in the face as hard as I can.

He's too shocked to react at first. I slap him again.

This time he flinches away from me, wanting no part of this. I walk back to my car as people start screaming at me. I climb in and the limo driver pulls away.

My son looks at me, and it's not fear in his eyes like I expect; it's anger. Anger at the crowd. My huge, brilliant son—these people have no idea what they're doing. They have no idea the storm they're calling down.

I see a sign held high as we pass the last of the protestors. They are shouting again, having found the full flower of their outrage. The sign says only one word: *Die*.

Not this time, I think to myself. *Your turn*.