

# 1

It had been years since I'd searched for my cousin. In the early days, I entered fringe-style message boards with a feverish enthusiasm, hoping to find lost girls but more often than not finding derelicts who hoped I *was* a lost girl, who asked things like whether I was tight or loose long before I knew how those words might apply to my anatomy. Sometimes I'd ask to be dropped at the mall, where I'd comb the shops I thought she'd like, lingering for hours over scents at Bath & Body Works, debating whether she'd like peach or raspberry, before stalking the aisles of Hot Topic.

It plagued me constantly, then, that I didn't know what she'd become. I imagined all sorts of variations on Andrea: Goth Andrea with pink and green hair and fishnets and a deep love for Joy Division; Andrea who snuck out to kiss older boys on the middle school jungle gym after dark; Andrea who mastered a fouetté and went on to perform at the Palais Garnier. It drove me mad, not knowing. More so than not having her in my life, maybe. It was the lack of connection to who she was, the absence of noise where I'd once been able to read her thoughts almost as easily as my own.

Patty and Tom—my adoptive parents—might have known what I was up to or might not have. Patty had a strict rule: No dwelling in the past. What's done is done. Put one foot in front of the other. Et cetera. To her, that meant no talking about anything that happened before I came into their home. She was desperately afraid I'd be perceived as abnormal, and in the way she fretted, I knew I must be. But Tom was the one who most often drove me to those solo outings, and some-



times the look he gave me when he dropped me off was so nakedly pitying and sweet that I'd have to jump quickly out of the car with hardly a good-bye in order not to cry.

When Facebook finally went wide, I scanned endless pages of anonymous profiles. Every time I saw a girl who looked like me, I clicked, leading to a string of dead ends. Same with Google. My late teens and early twenties were spent skipping parties to stay in and search "Andrea Indiana" and "Andrea Mother Collective" and "cult bust 1990s kid survivors" and a million other iterations of the same damn things. My college roommates would stumble in at five a.m., lipstick smeared, eyes glazed, limbs weak and trembling from dancing, and I'd still be sitting there at my desk. Searching obsessively.

My whole life revolved around Andrea, and Andrea wasn't even there.

One day I spit in a cup and mailed it in to one of those DNA websites. When that didn't yield results, it occurred to me to ask the social worker who had been on my case. It seemed so obvious a solution that when I thought of it, I laughed aloud. After that didn't turn up any results, I gave up. Andrea had disappeared altogether, lost to the foster care system. With no last name or birth certificate, she may as well have ceased to exist the night I tossed a metaphorical grenade into the center of our childhoods.

It wasn't what I'd intended, of course. As an adult, I have realized that the biggest mistakes usually aren't intentional so much as idiotic and tragically avoidable. One little error. A misguided tweet, a rogue email, a forgetful, harried disposition and your reputation is ruined, you've lost your job, you've left your child in the back of the car on a hot day.

It was the start of summer, a Saturday. I had my window open and a soft breeze was filtering through the screen. The piece of tape I'd used to patch it had come dislodged and was flapping around. A mosquito had found its way in and drunk

heavily from my left shoulder before I noticed and squashed it, spreading a fine streak of blood across my palm. I'd been editing a manuscript and fighting off drowsiness with Skittles and Diet Coke. I intermittently scrolled through Twitter, following a viral debate over whether Taylor Swift, at thirty, ought to consider having babies before her looks faded and all her eggs turned to dust.

Working well into the weekend evenings, when everyone else was presumably out living their full, rich lives, had become typical for me aside from an occasional happy hour invitation from my supervisor, Elena. Ryan—the guy I'd been hooking up with—worked weekends at a bar, and most other people I knew disappeared at five p.m. Friday, receding into the glow of their relationships and family lives just as I receded into the glow of my computer screen. On the plus side, weekend hibernation saved me money—or rather, prevented me from sinking further into debt. The negative side, of course, was that it made me acutely aware of having nowhere to go.

I'd once been one of the kids Ryan catered to at the bar. I knew the game too well—was intimately familiar with the thin border between adolescence and adulthood. It was how I'd met him myself—drinking to casual oblivion as I began to cross that very threshold. Mine was a neighborhood for youths, artists, and leftovers. As one of the thirtysomethings who still lived there, I fell into the “leftover” category, though it could have been worse. It could have been a neighborhood populated by pregnant women, nannies, and strollers. I'd graduated from a vibrant, hopeful twentysomething with an alluringly blank future to what I was now—an adult with little to show for it other than a job and a cramped, dingy studio apartment.

The radiator in said apartment was inconsistent, and when it worked it was so hot to the touch it had actually given me a scar once. The second-floor light outside my unit turned off

and on at a whim, and more often than not I had to fumble my way home in the dark. The refrigerator worked—kind of—except for the condensation that gathered up top, never falling, like hundreds of small stalactites. I slept on a mattress a former roommate had handed down when she moved in with her boyfriend; all other décor consisted mostly of street finds. The only thing I ever splurged on—my one concession to vanity—was the set of hair extensions I replaced each month to cover the alopecia I'd had since I was a kid.

Even the large canvas that graced the wall above the patio set I'd repurposed as a dining table had been confiscated from a garbage bin outside an artist's loft during Open Studios. It was a painting of an empty boat, drifting away from its intended occupant, a woman trapped on an island. It was unsigned, and clearly someone hadn't thought it was very good, but I liked its mood: it had a relentless, lonely sort of beauty to it. I was glad to have saved it. I was proud of all my motley treasures. It was squalor of a kind, but I was comfortable in it. It was my own very small footprint in an oversaturated, overpriced city. Moreover, it was the only proof of progress I could point to.

I toggled fluidly between news headlines, email, and edits on nights like these, when time seemed infinite, so when I saw an email announcing "New DNA Relatives," it didn't really register. I absently clicked the See New Relatives button under a message that informed me one new relative had joined in the last thirty-one days.

Every now and then over the years, I'd clicked that same button to find a sixth-plus cousin or to be reminded of the gene mutation that allowed me to smell asparagus in my pee. After more than ten years on the site, I did not expect my one new relative to be Andrea. *My Andrea.*

*Andrea Rothko, the site listed. 1st Cousin. 13.8% DNA shared.*

My heart accelerated. *Cousin.* There it was, confirmed in

stark serif font. I clicked on the site's notifications tab. I had one new message, four days old.

She was cordial, even casual.

*Maeve! Is it really you? It's Andrea. Andrea Rothko, now. I can't believe this thing worked. I've tried to find you forever... why don't you have your last name listed? Look, I know this probably feels as shocking to you as it does to me, but text me when you get this, okay? Here's my number.*

My fingers went cold and my head swam. I'd imagined this very moment for so long. For more than two decades, I'd fantasized about our reunion. Now she was here. Like it was nothing at all. Like an entire lifetime hadn't separated us. I had a sudden, visceral urge to slam my computer shut. To stuff headphones in my ears and drown out whatever *this* was, this seemingly benign interaction that was actually as life-altering as it got. For a second, I was angry. She'd foisted herself on me, knowing there was no way of going back.

I switched over to Instagram and searched her name. Andrea Rothko. She wasn't even private. I clicked on her profile and felt my heart begin to accelerate as I flipped through her photos. There she was in a wedding dress, with a ruddy-complected man who gazed down at her adoringly. There they were together, posing in an apple orchard, laughing as he hoisted her high, she straining toward a top branch.

The normalcy of it cut me to my core.

I forced myself to take a breath. To pick up my phone, program in her number. It wasn't even eight p.m. yet; I could text her right then. Casual, confident, just like she'd messaged me.

Or I could ignore it. Go back to my easy, predictable routine of before. I stared at her message on my laptop. I felt hot. I ran a palm across my forehead; it was slick with sweat. I was about to shut my laptop and pretend the whole thing hadn't happened when a green dot appeared next to her name in the messaging tab of the DNA site.

She was online.

Which meant she'd see that I'd opened her message.

I quickly X-ed out of the site and slammed my laptop closed.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I whispered. I stood from my desk and paced the room in circles. If I didn't text her soon, it would be weird. She'd know how badly I was affected. Or I could pull myself together and send her the same kind of breezy text she'd sent me. *Yes.*

I picked my phone back up, casting around for appropriate words. I could do this. This was practically my forte: putting on "normal" for Patty as a kid, continuing it throughout college and on into my professional life that way, imposter syndrome lurking long after I'd succeeded in passing. The irony was, I'd managed to convince everyone except myself. Andrea didn't need to know that, though.

*Andrea! I just got your message. It's me. If our DNA percentage wasn't proven enough, I can assure you I'm the right Maeve. #*

I pressed Send and waited her out, my fingers trembling just above the keys. Why had I included a smiley face? *Idiot.* I reached for my wineglass, eager for something to do with my hands—I didn't trust myself not to start typing every single thought firing through my brain.

I took a long sip as the three dots appeared, then stopped, then appeared again. My palms dampened and my breathing had become audibly labored.

*I'm so glad I found you,* she wrote.

*I kind of can't believe it. Where do you live?* She hadn't listed her location on the site.

*New York,* she replied. *Upstate. Just moved here from the West Coast.*

Mere hours from where I sat.

*Happy birthday,* she typed, after a long pause.

I froze, frowning, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. I

was about to be thirty-three the following month. June 16 was the birthday my adoptive parents had assigned me, to commemorate the day I came to live with them. It was the date on all my official documentation. So it took me a second to understand the significance of her words. My eyes flickered to the calendar date on my phone. It was May 7: the twenty-fifth anniversary of the raid on the Mother Collective. I'd celebrated my eighth birthday that same day. How had I forgotten?

*I'd love to see you, she wrote. It's been so long, and—*She stopped. I imagined her casting about for words the same way I was. Everything had a subtext. *We could celebrate your birthday? I've—*Her typing trailed off again. There was a long pause as the ellipses started, stopped, started again. So she wasn't sure-footed. Something about the realization calmed me.

*—missed my cousin.*

*Cousin.* A word we'd never really been allowed to use. We'd whispered it anyway, in secret, behind closed doors and in the dark of night. We'd huddled under the covers in a shared bed and whispered it: "Cousin, I love you. Cousin, sleep tight." It had implied ownership, security, a sense of belonging to someone else when we didn't know who to belong to. It blew my mind that our relationship was finally confirmed.

I wanted to say yes; I really did. Yet I found myself hesitating. I clicked through her photos again. I scrutinized the images of her with all those smiling groups of people, their arms casually draped around one another. I studied her face for any evidence of artifice or hints of lingering trauma. But she looked happy and well-adjusted. *Normal.*

It would have been largely my fault if her life had turned out otherwise. My fingertips rested gently on the keyboard. Seeing Andrea again would link my present to my past in a way Tom and Patty never would have wanted.

*I'd like that, I typed. Because what else could I say? To*



reject someone whose life I'd already upended once would be unimaginably cruel.

She was heading to the city the following Tuesday for some meetings, so we agreed to get together that morning for breakfast. After we said our good-byes, I took a long breath and reopened my laptop. It still felt surreal. Now that I had Andrea's last name—Rothko—I was hungry for more. According to her LinkedIn, she was CEO of a start-up that had been making the news for its groundbreaking contributions to the lifestyle market and billions of dollars in recent funding. So Andrea wasn't just a cog in the tech machine; she was crucial to its operations. She'd actually been in the news a lot, though mostly in science journals.

I could hardly blame myself for not knowing the esoteric underpinnings of Silicon Valley. These were the kinds of things you didn't really pay attention to when you resided on the East Coast with your nose buried in novels. Wealth, tech—they were as distant and theoretical as the luxury buildings in Dubai I'd read about, so tall they punctured the sky.

"NewLife Dazzles with Its Cutting-Edge AI Technology," one front-page headline in a major national newspaper read.

"Female CEO of NewLife 'Marries' Groundbreaking Vi-generos™ Tech with Humanity for Better Family Planning," read another.

I clicked away, eager to absorb everything about Andrea and the details of her world.

I typed "NewLife CEO" in the search bar. The only photo of Andrea that popped up in Images was her LinkedIn shot. I switched back to the news tab.

Andrea was mentioned in articles featuring NewLife, but she was mostly absent from Google Images. Instead, photos of a colleague, Emily, flooded the results page. Emily seemed to be some sort of tech goddess, worshipped by the top tier of Silicon Valley.

Andrea's professional life was, admittedly, intriguing. Even in my childish imaginings I had mostly assumed she'd struggled too. It hadn't occurred to me that she'd be wealthy, accomplished, renowned, and *loved*. My cousin had made a real life for herself. What did I have to offer, after all these years? If my life was a lazy river, Andrea's was the Autobahn. I couldn't help but feel that all those years I was looking for her, she'd been jetting in the other direction.