

99 Percent Identical

I am writing a story, and so I will start with words.

Return. Tolerant. Charter. Gravel.

Linguists argue about the exact number of English words in existence, but my Oxford English Dictionary requires two hands to lift, and so I'm prepared to accept the lofty estimate of a million.

Democratic. Vegetarian. Seed.

I have one million pieces of language at my disposal to tell this story. According to a test I took on the internet last year, I have over 32,000 of those words directly accessible in my arsenal.

Publicity. Activate. Horoscope.

One million words from a twenty-six-letter alphabet. A deceptively finite toolset to build a seemingly infinite vocabulary, each of the words a different combination of between one and 189,819 letters. Each story I tell is just a permutation of twenty-six symbols and the spaces between them.

Trick. Decline. Crevasse. Animosity.

The longest English word is the full scientific name of the largest known protein. At over 189,000 letters, it's more manageably known as titin. Stories are made of words of letters, some of them long enough to require three hours to pronounce. An even more finite set of those letters spell out the stories in our DNA, the repeating bases that are strung into chains of three billion links, labelled simply as A, T, C, and G. Adenine, thymine, cytosine, and guanine, their letters repeated and sequenced and recombined, spell out the code that tells the world how to create us. We are written like stories with words in four letters; our chapters are our genes. AAGTCGCG is a sentence in a language our bodies read, an instruction that initiates the first spark of our being.

My genetic code gave me my blonde hair and blue eyes, my height, my metabolism. I know that one sequence buried in my genome tells my body to have a predisposition for alcoholism. Because of a gene called TAS2R38, I dislike the taste of coffee. And a group of six genes tells my skin cells to produce a low number of the molecules we call melanin. The thorny societal issue of skin color is a matter of six genes, an enzyme called tyrosinase, and a misattributed significance to a natural range of human possibilities.

The nebulous force that is "society" wants to simplify and reduce the truth in these stories. The truth, though, is that even the story told in DNA is far less simple than we want it to be. Only one percent of DNA actually consists of genes—human genes are a fragmented novel floating around among internet message boards, miscellaneous song lyrics, and IKEA furniture instructions. The detritus of DNA consists of sections that regulate the genes, extraneous fragments, large areas of repeating sequences. There are portions of the DNA that exist to copy and reinsert themselves into other areas of the genome, like a boisterous and unwelcome party guest. Our DNA has to protect itself against its own intrusion. If DNA is a story, it's *War and Peace*: no coherent genre, an overabundance of story lines, tangents abounding, philosophical

and religious musings interrupting the narrative told within. The impulse to reach sweeping conclusions about genetics relies on an ideal genome with none of the complications of reality. As is often the case, the story is more complex than its popular depiction.

I can't control that the melanocytes in my skin produce more light-colored DHICA-eumelanin instead of the darker DHI-eumelanin any more than I can deactivate my need for oxygen. But I live in a society that has written stories of how individuals from each group should be, and I am on the kinder side of those narratives because of my white skin. Those stories that start with DNA end in racism.

I can't control my skin pigmentation, but I can control what I choose to do with the privilege it affords me. Retrospectively speaking, I don't think studying abroad was the right choice to make. It certainly isn't true that studying abroad is only possible for white students—there were several students of color within my program—but the population of students with the resources to have this experience are, admittedly, mostly white. The stories that have limited opportunities for people of color in the United States since its inception are still at play, reducing wages and increasing prison sentences and affecting lives in ways I will never comprehend. I live in a country that was founded on racism, among a society of wealthy white families whose familial wealth came from slave labor, and I benefit from that history. I can regurgitate facts all I want, though; it doesn't change the fact that I used those benefits to essentially go on a three-month vacation. Even in the view that my study abroad experience came directly from my college attendance, my ability to attend a private institute resulted from the same privilege. Any way you look at it, being white and from a financially stable family brought me to this place where I am now, and it took me to Florence, Italy.

My time in Florence was constantly tinged with the sense of “I am not supposed to be doing this”—a sense that, if I had the resources and opportunity to run away to Europe, I surely could have done something far more productive with all that time and money. Perhaps I could have aided the fight in worldwide LGBTQ liberation, or organized action against the horrific treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in my home country. But no, I thought I should go to Europe instead.

My first few weeks in Italy felt like I was constantly watching myself and thinking, *The audacity!*—like an out-of-body experience. Maybe that was a fault of mine, refusing to be fully present in the moment out of disbelief. It was a combination of genuine awe, in the vein of *I'm really standing on ground that is not in the US for the very first time ever*, and that sense of betrayal, even, that I decided to do *this* rather than follow some grand gesture of goodwill. Maybe it was, in a way, an insult to all of those deserving people who *would* have been fully present, who just didn't have the privilege my story holds. Therein lies an issue with which I grappled for the duration of my time abroad: how to fully accept and enjoy my experience while reconciling the extreme privilege that allowed me to have it.

These are the times when I regret having gone abroad at all. I have no good “defense” for the fact that I did this—I feel like I need to excuse myself for following through with it. No

amount of musing or questioning will erase the fact that I am a very privileged person who chose to exercise that privilege in an almost flamboyant way.

There's this sense that I'm not supposed to acknowledge any of this—that I'm supposed to accept this privilege as my normal and avoid thinking about it too hard lest I feel guilty about it. But that's part of my story now. I chose this; it's the narrative I created within my life. I'm not one to say that things happen for a reason, but I doubt I could continue on without rationalizing those reasons and writing those coherent plots after the fact. It's what I'm trying to do in writing this. I need to find how this fits into my life. I need to pinpoint a place for my time abroad within the larger context of my ongoing life in the states, as an artist, as a student.

I find it vaguely embarrassing to even get into the topic of studying abroad, if I'm truly being honest. What can I possibly say—I decided to hemorrhage my euros in Italy for a few months? That part is true, but nobody wants to hear that, right? We all want to continue believing the myths of white supremacy—that all of this is earned and deserved rather than built from a system of inherent inequality and subjugation.

All humans are 99 percent identical, genetically speaking, but those shared stories diverge when they come in contact with reality.

I passed the same Romani women begging on the streets every day in Florence. In English, the common word we have for this population is a slur: g*psy. I came to know the women by their braids, their pink wedge sandals, their long skirts. I stopped wearing long skirts myself, fearing the association that my skirts might have produced in others' minds, the stories others might read into their folds. The Romani women with their trailing skirts would weave between tourists in the busiest parts of the city, mostly surrounding the Duomo, shaking paper cups full of change and pleading with the crowds in pitiful, half-crying tones. In the orientation for my program, the program leaders told us to ignore them—everyone did. For some members of the Romani community, this was a way of life; they considered begging a career, and even the Italian Supreme Court recognized begging as a Roma cultural practice.

Any research into Romani communities reveals the enormous prejudice and racism they face. They're repeatedly slandered and their humanity denied; they're forced out of their homes and communities. Throughout all of Europe, my host country is the one with the most negative perception of the Romani. But those were stories I only uncovered after my daily contact with this culture was a memory, a remnant of a life I no longer lived. In the moments I spent near the Romani, I was always in a race to move further away. The fact that everyone else around me shared the same goals doesn't make my actions any more noble. I accepted the stories telling me of their untrustworthiness, of the harm they might do. I had enough euro coins rattling in my wallet to buy me a gelato or three on the way to class, coins I could have quickly slipped into their plastic cups, but each day I chose not to. Even when given a daily opportunity to be charitable and giving and open and a force for change, to be the kind of person I like to think I am, I didn't.

And so I return to wondering what I can truly say for myself. I know with absolute certainty that my story will never consist of their plots. The whole time I was in Italy, the

acknowledgement of the begging and pleading people on the street came with the assurance that their story is entirely estranged from my own—theirs will never be my experience. The story granted to me, the privilege and the power, means that I cannot know their truth; I will always be insulated from the reality they inhabit. I will always be traveling down the streets on the way to class, with the ability to stop and buy a gelato should I choose, and they will be desperate and ignored. What started as the story of base pairs and hydrogen bonds transformed into one of cultural misunderstandings and penniless desperation.

All of the English words at my disposal can't capture their stories. We're 99 percent identical and a million words apart.

Stories perennially undergo simplification. When we tell stories, we're not just concerned with truth; our tellings are complicated by human impulses of dramatics, and artful language, and understandability. Even when I tell my own stories, I know they're imperfectly told—to be more enjoyable, to appeal to a wider audience, to fit them into a larger narrative. The stories within this piece are removed from truth even when I attempt to tell them truthfully. Words on a page, even pictures on a page, even both, can't capture the complexity of a lived story.

It's like titin. None of us want to wait three hours for our doctors to pronounce titin's full name—we just need to know that we're at risk for cardiac disease. We sacrifice meticulous accuracy for the sake of our bodies and their stories, to spend three hours examining potential treatments rather than droning a single word. Likewise, the stories I tell will always be separated from truth by at least a thin film. There will always be some artfulness or forced narration obscuring an objective truth that no longer exists within my telling of it. That's how we create our stories—trying and forgetting and reducing and simplifying. And trying again, and forgetting and reducing and simplifying.

We say “I loved studying abroad” when we mean “Studying abroad was a complicated experience, and I have a lot of complicated feelings about it.”

We say “I ignored the Romani women on the street” when we mean “I thought about the Romani women and their hurt every day.”

We say “titin” when we mean something much longer and more unwieldy, something whose complexity eludes our ability to easily manage. Because that's how stories are. Just imitations of a life too expansive for these twenty-six letters.

One of titin's roles is to provide structure to the chromosomes, where DNA is located. We invented the longest English word to describe the substance that physically gives support to the origin of our stories, our language, our letters. We exist to make decisions and derisions, to create words and the stories they build, to pass judgments and beggars on the street—to give a 189,000-letter name to titin—because of titin itself.

We can tell stories because of the story that told us.

