Jesse Giallombardo - The Tree

The DNA test was to verify if Johnny Cancel was really my dad. That washed up Ramone wanna-be, with the hit song I was named after. We met at the truck stop diner. Surprised by my green eyes, relieved that they were only contact lenses. With an apology to me and my absent brother, he gifted me his ’72 Fender Mustang and some records still out in the car. Gaze distant, suit wrinkled, leaving town soon, same as ever. Hiding the disappointment of my cheek swab request. I went straight to the pawn shop with that guitar of his.

Three weeks later a woman from The Tree was at my door examining my ID. She asked if my name was really Stella Cancel. Before I was born my father changed his last name from Kowalcek. She presented an envelope. While I opened it she told me Johnny was my dad, hoping to be the bearer of good news. Where is he now? Who knows. She asked about my long-passed mother.

Why deliver the results in person? I didn’t pay for genealogy profiling, but they run it anyway for hereditary disease research. It’s in the fine print. They found something unique. Not a disease. Not a mutation or a superpower or whatever else my nerves laughed out. Something rare. She offered me $10,000 to come to The Tree corporate headquarters for an afternoon of questions.

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In an upscale conference room with curtains drawn, I assumed an attentive duchess slant in a chair of chrome and leather, curious. The most salesman-looking of the standing trio started to explain. We think of a family tree with ourselves as the trunk. The roots of offspring proliferate beneath us, and the branches of ancestors bloom out above. An animated tree projection followed along. When we zoom out far enough, as his graphic did, that tree starts to narrow as we get higher. If you went back to the beginning of mankind, the top would be very small indeed.

He was a showman of insincere awe and dramatic cadence, pacing the mirror wall as if trapped in an aquarium. The Tree had a breakthrough new genome processing approach. They could take a person’s DNA and generate a full DNA profile of each individual parent. Matching me to my dad was easy; starting with my cheek swab sample, they projected upwards to develop profiles of my two parents. The nameless profile of “my father” matched Johnny’s swab. If he wasn’t my dad, I’d have a full father profile but no identity to accompany it.

Once they extrapolate a parental DNA profile, they can go upward and generate profiles for the parents of that profile. And so on, indefinitely. All eyes on my minimized reaction. Indefinitely, he repeated. Competitors will promise to reveal your family origin, but that’s based on how far you’re willing to look back. It’s the interconnectivity that most fascinated their researchers. Talking with no room for interjections, he switched to another tree graphic densely entangled with symbolic connections representing all human history. He pointed without scientific accuracy to Julius Caesar, Pliny the Elder, Jack the Ripper, Pharaoh Narmer. And I, of course, was at the bottom with Kevin Bacon.

I paused and rewound him. Yes, they had Jack the Ripper’s DNA, collected from crime scenes, and they knew exactly where he fit. He had two brothers, a sister, and four known children. The salesman was uncomfortable and made the quickest glance to the ceiling behind me. In the mirror I noted a small cctv camera. He continued. They discovered Jack’s identity when they learned his mother had a son from another man, a half-brother, who had already been established. Navigating the nameless people that connected them was the key. But they couldn’t go public with these kinds of breakthroughs, the other salesman said, because then the floodgates would open. Mapping DNA theoretically against all human existence could revolutionize criminal justice and historical research, but my interest caused them to skip ahead a few slides to the marketing strategy. They preferred me overwhelmed.

Now the younger and hipper salesman spoke. These DNA profiles could be converted to a digital portrait, with sliders to adjust for age and fitness level, and a few beta presets for hairstyle. Like the character builder module in a video game. Imagine seeing relatives from before the advent of photography. A stillborn baby aged to adulthood or a beloved grandmother in her youth. Imagine seeing yourself older, adjusted for weight loss goals, or without some odious childhood facial scar. Seeing an absent father for the first time and having new tools to identify him. It was a unique experience that they believed people would pay for.

They’d begun crossmatching profile imagery against a massive archive of photography and paintings, to try to get as many identities attached to profiles as they could. There’s a market for matches to historical figures and celebrities.

I was concerned about how people might react to all of this. The death of creationism, for starters. Being related to someone evil. Racists offended by their own bloodlines. Any number of shocks and surprises if parents suddenly aren’t who they thought, born from rape or scandal. I sneezed, causing a thump from the mirror as if I’d startled someone. The hip salesman offered a crisp, monogrammed handkerchief. KTP. I refused and regrouped my duchess slant.

They originally had a plan to set up storefronts, but the tech was too powerful, the implications and risks too difficult to work around. My concerns were a perfect example. The first salesman nodded in agreement as he repositioned himself in front of the glass door. A scaled back rollout claimed to only reach 3 generations. This would all be done online via samples mailed to the lab to avoid confrontation. And these would secretly seed up to populate the history of human interconnection.

The woman who came to my house raised the blinds and finally spoke. Stella Cancel. Why would we share our proprietary products and capabilities with you? A single nod, a signal, to someone in the hallway. Because, as she traced with a pointer along the now-sunlit graphic, every living person has a lineage to the top of this tree. Except you.