



## n-words



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*As is probably evident from the title, "N-Words" is a story about racism. The subject has long been of scientific interest to Kosmatka; in college, he read every issue of a prominent scientific journal, dating back nearly 100 years, and it changed his whole view of science. "I learned that science is fallible," Kosmatka said, "and that in the wrong hands, it can absolutely be racist."*



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ted kosmatka

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hey 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.

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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?”

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*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."

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“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 *thou-*

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*sands* 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.

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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-

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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."

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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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