

The Wish

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”

We memorized the words in history class, reciting them as if they were obvious, as if they were complete.

But sitting in my kitchen on my seventeenth birthday, turning a small white box over in my hands, I wasn't quite sure what “equal” was supposed to mean.

As I leaned forward to blow out the flickering yellow and blue candles scattered atop a warm lemon cake, my chest tightened with anticipation. This was it: the moment that might finally answer the question I had carried quietly in my heart for years. Inside the box was a 23andMe DNA test, something small enough to hold in my palm but heavy with the promise of an answer to the unknown.

I glanced around the room that seemed to engulf me. My mother's kind eyes met mine, steady and reassuring. My father smiled softly from across the table.

Four years earlier, I had stood in front of my mirror, tracing the hyphen in “African-American” as if it might reveal something more. It felt less like a connection and more like a divide, a thin line that had separated me from a past I couldn't fully see. The farthest I could trace my family history back was Vicksburg, Mississippi, where my grandmother had lived before the Great Migration. Before that, everything dissolved into a deep silence.

I had always wondered what existed in that quiet.

Thousands of miles away, across an ocean, there were places filled with languages I didn't speak, traditions I didn't know, and people whose lives somehow led to mine. Would I still be the same person if I knew them? Would I still love the same books, laugh the same way, would I recognize the girl staring back at me in the mirror?

They say your face is a legacy of generations of people who loved each other. But what does that legacy mean for me if I can't name it?

When the results finally came in, they arrived not as stories, but as percentages. Numbers mapped across regions, methodic and distant. West African. Nigerian. Ghanaian. Fragments of a continent, reduced to data points on an illuminating screen.

I stared at them, waiting for recognition, waiting for something to feel whole.

But that wholeness never appeared.

I wondered then— how can I be a part of a country which has appropriated my memories of my ancestors and those who have come before me?

The words we had recited in class came back to me then: *all men are created equal*. Equal in theory, equal in principle, but never truly equally remembered. Not equally recorded. Not equally known.

Some histories are preserved in documents and stories, passed down carefully through generations. Others are scattered, interrupted, rewritten, or erased altogether. Equality, I realized, doesn't mean that every story survives in the same way.

I closed my laptop and looked again at my parents, at the life I knew instead of the one I couldn't quite seem to trace. Maybe my history wasn't something I would ever fully recover. Maybe it would always exist in pieces: part fact, part imagination— pieces of something never truly whole.

But sitting there, I began to understand something I hadn't before.

Being part of America's story isn't about having identical pasts or complete answers. It isn't about neat percentages or perfect knowledge. It's about recognizing the weight of what's missing, acknowledging it, and still claiming a place in the story.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident..."

The words no longer felt obvious to me. But maybe that was the point.

Maybe they were never meant to describe the world as it is, only the world we are still trying to understand.