

## **The Story of Szop: The Living Ancestor**

### **Chapter 1. The Origins of Szop**

I have decided to tell my story now, just in case I should die. I've always thought it was possible, although I've always known deep down it was improbable. I don't remember the name I was given at birth. Social security numbers, all those things made by nations that crumbled. All of it was profane and impermanent. I think I always had a sense of that, I felt more than other people around. My age or any other age, after a while, becomes irrelevant, white noise that fades into the background.

I do remember the family I came from. I remember them very fondly. They were gun-toting white republicans with a penchant for accidents, and a surprisingly high rate of murder by cops. They were a carpe-diem, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants ilk, and was definitely one of them. I remember at some young age, possibly as a teenager, trying to take an ATV off a skateboard jump. My injuries should have killed me, but instead I was released from the hospital just three days later. Doctors called it a miracle. The memory stays with me because it was the first time I felt like I had evidence of my special abilities. My memory is also pretty sharp, but it's hard to hold on to the very beginning, because it was so long ago.

Nobody really understands my abilities, even after advanced researchers ran every test they could dream up, over hundreds of years, all I really have is my own hunch about it. I know that I was born intersex, which was caused by a genetic variation, which resulted in infertility, which is why I've had no biological children. My suspicion, as good a guess as any, is that the same variation allowed for my longevity. I'd speculate further that it had something to do with my family's millenia-deep tradition of fool-hardiness. It seems that whatever powers that exist in the universe suggested that all the recklessness should add up like emergent properties to one last indestructible person who would end the family line. As I suspected I am the last one left, by a good gap.

I was always remarkably healthy despite my family's traditions. I was also lucky not to be too prone to addiction, although I lost my twenties to alcoholism. Alcohol was just so ubiquitous back then. I was grappling with the loss of three family members. My uncle and cousin and sister had all died trying to use a home-made submarine they devised out of scrap wood and window caulk. We had always been accused of tempting natural selection, no one guessed what that would look like until much later. Even then, I had an inkling, as was the nature of my grief, that I was being primed for an everlasting destiny. This felt like the least of it, a turning point from a foundation of fool-hardiness.

I'm not sure for how many years I drank, more than two, less than ten. I joined AA a few times, made connections, cried, got a six month chip, and got bored with the program and went back to drinking. I guess those were the first times I found my way onto the streets as well. Somewhere in the blur, I got the first version of the name I use now. "Trash Panda" they called me, for the revered raccoon. For the way I seemed to thrive on the scraps left behind by others,

when the streets became my home. At some point, the expense of my drinking was the thing that got to me the most. So I sat at the library reading books about how to make beer and wine. Then I started making wine in a plastic container in a tent downtown. Somehow this made perfect sense to me, I never questioned what I was doing and I never got caught. I was good at making wine. It was the first time I really felt like I was good at something. I developed a reverence for the process, and everything slowed down around it. I was always good at simple things like that. I finally found a rehab center that would take my state insurance and I went. I must have been in my 30s when I recovered from alcoholism. Having the constitution that I do, I never felt sick even when I was an addict, but in recovery I noticed great improvements: My hair thickened, I gained weight, my skin felt softer and my thoughts were quicker.

Around that same time, I had a sort of nervous breakdown. Therapists offered that I must be processing the latent grief I'd been avoiding. During the blurry years my parents had also died, my dad had been dared by my mom to run through a massive bonfire and died of smoke inhalation, my mom, who soldiered on without a shred of guilt, died at 64 in an accident at demolition derby. I had a best friend for some of those years, but I lost them to withdrawal before I got sober. These were all good enough reasons for a break down, so how could I convince anyone it was something else?

How could anyone believe that my grief was about coming to accept that my lot was more a destiny than anyone else could predict? While my peers aged around me I recovered from the tax years of heavy drinking had put on my body. I remember looking in the mirror, the face that stared back at me was twenty. I was still twenty, physiologically. Who would believe me if I tried to say so? I had to come to terms with it all on my own. The idea that comrades would wither away and die just like my family had. That friends and lovers, no matter how sternly they decided to stand by me, would pass just the same with time, but that I would be everlasting.

Of course I wasn't ready to put it to the test, I knew there were limitations to my gifts. I also knew there would be a wrong kind of attention I could attract if I kept living the way my family had. I didn't want to become a sideshow act. But even as the world moved into war, my mind found an eerie sense of calm. I knew I would still be there when the fighting was over. If the seas rose, or bombs fell, somehow I figured I would still be right there, figuring things out. Planting seeds, grinding grains, canning and fermenting and fixing, building new things. Those were the kind of skills I excelled at. Selfishly, I felt ready for whatever would come to pass.

And then it came, around the time I was in my forties I guess, when Iraq dropped bombs on New York City, claiming it was over some conflict, the madness going on in Europe, but they had more than enough reasons. This was a tragedy, but Americans were burnt out on school shootings and internal acts of terror and genocide. So we cried, but the mean of the zeitgeist was a detached sort of nihilism. When the president tried to send troops back to Iraq, they remembered the last time, and there were massive military strikes. Meanwhile, Mexico's economy stabilized, and a lot of Mexican families who had come here for a supposed "better life" decided to go home or at least move inland. Mexico's economy strengthened.

Americans were migrating in masses, the world was. It reminded me of yeast when the temperature gets too high, except that yeast booms, reproducing and moving wildly, wine comes pouring over the top of the bottle and forms a puddle on the ground. There wasn't a boom in reproduction, we were just moving. Zooming around at incredible speeds, looking for solid ground. New York City had been greatly damaged by successive hurricanes. Much of it had been rebuilt before the bombs fell, but parts like Long Island were considered unsalvageable. Crisis in Florida and California had government resources spread thin. The Mexican government saw the mess that their neighbor to the north had become, and the opportunity to win their land back.

Of course Mexico suffered from a terrible crisis of its own, extreme heat, killing people in droves. That was a problem in a lot of places. The US heartland became prime real estate, although it was not without its changes. Surges of Bangladeshi immigrants showed up in northern Mexico and the central United States, as their homeland was lost to the sea. People from Java and Ecuador, hurricane refugees from any low coastal country. For a country that had once been called "The Melting Pot", the phrase became much more true as the heat turned up.

Droves of people came with their own languages, cultures and traditions. In some ways, this was really a massive boon to our success, because we had to combine all the best strategies any of us had to survive. There was also a downside: People brought language and culture and food and strategy, but they also brought new diseases, some of which had been lost for milenia beneath the permafrost. Sickness was rampant, and pandemics became so many and varied that the population grew numb to any effort to control it. Every community lost greatly, to disease and heat and drought. Food and water ran short in many places.

## Chapter 2: The War

By that time, I had found a new community with a group of eastern european refugees in rural Nebraska. I don't remember when I learned to speak Polish or exactly how we got to Nebraska, but I know speaking Polish helped me a lot when it came to fitting in with that community. Polish became the predominant language used by our community. In the beginning we were just a tent city, hidden in the woodland which became a Pawnee jurisdiction as various indigenous tribes began to rise to political power. The war around us was a nasty mess, and public opinion tended towards wanting it over with whatever the cost. The landscape was a lot of rouge and independent military factions, some of which defected to the Mexican side.

The summers were brutal, and the winters were mild save for subzero snaps. We survived by consolidating the heat of our bodies, and not all of us survived. I was sad, worried, afraid I guess, but only of things staying a sad mess forever. Falling under Pawnee jurisdiction happened to work out well for our tent city. Our jurisdiction fought for Mexico, as most indigenous jurisdictions ended up doing. We formed our own Polish-speaking unit. The military talked in many languages, and had to develop codes and pigins for cogent communication, but this actually became key to Mexico's success in the war. Intelligence could not keep up with the multilingual approach our disjointed military perfected.

I started using my current name during the war, Szop, which is simply the Polish word for the same animal we sometimes call a trash panda. I liked the name Szop because it felt closer to the given name I can't remember anymore, but I probably did remember then. I always worried that names having to do with racoons might have a racial connotation, but I felt like the Polish translation alleviated that concern. I've been Szop ever since. I was still in my 40s when the war ended, and my face in the mirror was still unweathered and fresh. People said I didn't look a day over twenty-five and I was sure they meant it sincerely.

At the same time, I already felt like I'd lived out a millenium. There was one living member of my family of origin, a sister who had always been kind of our family's black sheep. She had a lot of anxiety, and didn't take risks the way the rest of us were famous for doing. She was traumatized by it, a shut in. She wanted nothing to do with me. To me my family's untimely deaths felt fitting. Of course there was a tragedy about it. It was terrible that they were gone, I loved them and missed them, but I was also proud of them. I never had to worry about whether or not they died with regrets. I knew they didn't. They'd lived and died entirely on their own terms. The friend I lost to alcoholism blended in with the comrades I lost in the war, famine, disease and heat. Too many to count. Those deaths were different, those people were taken from me. I felt robbed of those connections, but I was also grateful I survived, I never took that for granted.

Fortunately I still had living comrades and a community. The entire United States ceded to Mexico, and I was a veteran of the revolution. The Mexican government subsidized housing and hospitals in my area. They built a giant desalination plant in California. They got to fixing roads

and infrastructure. Everyone left was preoccupied with repair. We needed to be, otherwise we'd have lost steam and died as well. Depression was rampant, but everyone worked together. We picked up the pieces and tried to move forward. I was given a house with a yard for a garden.

My grapes produced wonderfully in three seasons, and my wine fermented all through the years. I grew patient, imagining the generations of yeast that rose and fell within my carboys. Galaxies of life whose complexities were lost on me, made the wine that would become my livelihood. I grew rich, which had a different meaning than it did before the war. Now to me "rich" meant that life was easy, I could trade a bottle of wine for just about anything I needed. The world was still filled with problems and uncertainty, but I lost track of time, years went by where I couldn't have told you my own age.

But I remember realizing that I didn't need to make as much wine as I had been making, and that I had more time than I'd had before. I built a vintage and began to store bottles for prosperity. Other occupations came to pass. Most of them had to do with gardening and food production, I did forestry work and fished. I milked goats and collected eggs from hens of neighbors when they traveled. And then I saw that help was needed somewhere far outside my comfort zone. Babysitting; the people had voted for the school day to start at eleven am, because of studies that said children don't learn as much in the early morning. The same measure did away with summer break. Parents had kids home more and seemed more exhausted and overwhelmed than ever before. So people with spare time opened morning care centers to bridge the gap.

## **Chapter 4: Alma**

Children scared me, but as a fifty-something war vet, I wasn't about to admit to that. I knew I couldn't have any of my own and that had always come with a sense of relief. The intuition of my time horizon made the idea of raising a child with a normal lifespan an obvious tragedy, oh but wasn't tragedy at the center of my destiny? Although some things had stabilized, it was still a difficult landscape to survive, death was commonplace. Maybe I should have never even gotten involved with children in the first place. When I got the news that Alma's parents died of heatstroke while working construction, Alma was already hiding. She used to scare me half to death with her impromptu games of hide-and-seek. You'd think I'd seen it all, but caregiver was one of the most harrowing hats I ever wore.

I let Alma's grandma break the news to her at home, she went to school that day. I knew the importance of honesty, but also the importance of balance and normalcy and consistency. I got another call that evening, Alma's grandma asking me to take her in. Apparently of all the caregivers in her community, I was Alma's favorite, she and her grandmother had decided I was

the best person to raise her. I'd never seen it coming. I understood tragedy was sort of the border around everything, all my thoughts and feelings. I didn't say yes right away, there were a lot of considerations, but it's hard to shirk such an honor when you're chosen for it.

Having a child helped me to keep track of time, I came to love finding her, of course having her around all the time made me keen to her hiding spots. I worried so much. I worried so much it hurt. I always heard that real love wouldn't hurt, but this was the realest love I ever felt, and it was torture, worse than anything I'd ever experienced before. Worse than anything I could imagine. If the idea of having a baby scared me, why would I even have considered adopting a child of nine? How could I have declined? I realized that I was scared to get that close to anyone. Long black hair, big gap-toothed grin.

A decade passed in what felt like a month, in what felt like an eternity, in forty seasons, in 350 million heartbeats. My Alma was a young woman standing before my eyes. She got married for the first time when she was just nineteen. She was a hopeless romantic, foolhardy in her own sense of the word. My family. She changed my heart. Everything was for her after I adopted her. I saved every drawing, every scrap of paper. Every sculpture, made from clay or wire or bark. Sculpting was her natural gift and I encouraged her. She learned the trade of wine making, but I knew she was going to be an artist. She suffered from asthma, as many children born around that time did. I had to keep track of her inhaler, I'd never had that kind of responsibility before. I took it so seriously. I think I was a good parent, I tried my best, it was the hardest thing I've ever done. Can ten years happen in a single heartbeat?

Alma and her husband moved to a house nearby, I visited almost every day, she loved me as much as I loved her. I was grateful to have them in my life. I heard my sister died in her 70s after a short battle with dementia. She never married or had children. As I predicted, I was the last of my family line, but my adopted family carried on, after her divorce, Alma was single for a while. She became more sensible and grounded as she approached her thirties and married again, this time to a much better match. They had a child to whom she gave a traditional Polish name "Szymon" in my honor. We remained close through the years, but she developed her own life as well. She traveled around the world for her art career. We still had hardship all around the world, but through her eyes I watched nature repair itself. Rivers were on track for being clean enough to drink from, new protected areas grew dense with life, and the plagues died down in severity.

Mexico had a wonderful universal healthcare and education system by then. My worries were few. With no recommendation, I decided to see a doctor twice a year for an exam. I started to fear a situation where I became terminally ill, but lived the horrors of forecasted months for years or decades. It was one thing to have it happen, but as a parent I couldn't bare the idea. If I did develop any disease, it felt essential to catch it as early as possible. So I gardened, and fished and canned and fermented, and shared the bounty with my community. I think those were my very best years. I started to look, to the untrained eye, like an old lady, although I never ascribed much to gender, and my hair skipped gray and shown white as snow, It felt sudden and I can't remember when it happened. Still, I felt nothing like at the end of my life.

When I was 88, I noticed a freckle that shifted and changed and grew. It was a melanoma, which I had surgically removed and never thought about again. Then at 96, my mammogram came back positive for breast cancer, I opted for a double mastectomy (which my medical team insisted was overkill) and wondered why I hadn't done it sooner. When I turned 100, the local news threw me a party which my daughter enjoyed more than I did. Alma unveiled a sculpture of me she'd made out of clay. It was nearly life-sized, and it captured me in a way no one had ever seen me before. Like me perhaps, a sculpture, ageless.

In an interview, I was asked for my "secret" for the first time. I dared not divulge the depths of an honest answer to a reporter who thought they'd got a cheery fluff assignment. I stuck to a simple "it's a gift and a miracle, not anything I did or didn't do." I left out the parts that were hard about it, and how much longer the future seemed to stretch ahead of me. How depressingly daunting it all seemed. When I was 112 I was interviewed again for breaking a record in my jurisdiction. When I reached 126, I broke the world record and showed no signs of slowing down.

That was also around the time I was approached by a local teaching hospital. I think until then I took for granted how lucky I'd been, being left alone, instead of prodded, drugged, and cut open just for being intersex. Mexican healthcare had done away with that kind of practice by the time I broke the record, I don't think it was happening anywhere in the world. I couldn't fault the practical scientists of my community for wanting to understand my longevity. I realized my potential to help humanity, so I volunteered to let the doctors have a look. As was always suspected but never confirmed, I have internal ovotestis. I learned, as I had felt in my gut, that my ovotestis contained no germ cells.

I was told about studies done on nematodes (which sounds like a scary monster, but is actually a microscopic worm.) Scientists had been lacerating the germ cells of these tiny animals for well over a century. The creatures have a natural average lifespan of twenty-three days, but with their germ cell lacerated, they can last up to 90. Scientists also discovered a natural variant, born with no germ cells, that would live around 60 days in captivity. Of course the doctors who examined me stressed that this had little bearing on me. They'd never studied such things in humans and suspected them to go pretty differently. But I took to heart the kind of ball-park estimate, and began to believe I may live around 250-300 years. I've been warned that belief is a powerful thing, and that this belief by itself might kill me even if I could live even longer.

Of course Mexico's universal health care system had the overall population living longer, and I had no way to predict how long the average person would be living in another hundred years. The world stayed connected through the internet, although it had changed quite a bit, along with language itself, which had become a lot more localized. The rising temperatures seemed to incubate an acceleration of linguistic development. I never learned Spanish, and instead continued speaking Polish even after I became a naturalized Mexican. Eventually, I learned a local Caddoan language, the official language of our jurisdiction, and by this time my community spoke a unique blended Caddo-slavic creole. I also ended up learning related pidgins and creoles that popped up in surrounding areas, especially having a daughter, which forced me to become more integrated with surrounding communities. I'm writing this in a pigin

that's used widely throughout the country for common communications. I'm sure it will be translated to many languages thanks to my fame. I don't remember where or when I learned Polish, but it's hard to imagine I ever spoke only one language.

I hoped to find another like myself, someone who could watch the world change in cycles alongside me instead of ultimately abandoning me for death. It still hurt when friends died, of course it did. It doesn't matter how many times, it still hurts over and over again. I sifted through intersex communities, which had become commonplace, all the stigma around diversity was quick to fall away. I found some solidarity in those communities, but nobody quite like myself.

Israel was destroyed, I mention this because Palestine still persists to this day, which is as unlikely a story as my own. In my early hundreds, after Israel's obliteration, Palestine had a baby-boom, and more intersex babies were born in that time and place than ever recorded before in the world. Around the same time, a modern oral story was brought to my attention. The story was vaguely about people like me having been born in previous centuries, most of them to indigenous and black families. Many of them were victims of medical malpractice, but some lived under aliases or stolen identities. People who lived for centuries in secret. Hearing that story, whether or not it was true, eased my pain. Sure, watching those around me die was a pain, but at least I could do it without fear that I'd be murdered by the government.

Doctors weren't the only people who took interest in my longevity. Spiritual people also came to me for teachings, as hard as I tried to turn them away, I also couldn't blame them. As was customary, especially for rich people like myself, I kept a back table. An outdoor table which was seen as more-or-less a public space. When people came they expected me to share some grapes, at least when grapes were abundant. It was a point of pride for many rich families to offer their excess to visitors. I was nothing special in this way. I loved entertaining, and unless I was traveling, I'd offer grapes, wine, tea sandwiches, cheese, kombucha, fermented cabbage, soup, and special vegetable trays for pet rabbits. Rabbits had overtaken dogs as the most popular pet, after food producers bred a hardy stress resistant variety which was also hardy to travel. These rabbits became very popular as a food source before they found their way to back yards and living rooms. Their care and feeding was considerably cheaper than that of a dog, and their carbon emissions were much lower. After the crisis and the war, people did care about these things more, a lot more.

As time went on, I received more and more of these visitors. Not just neighbors who were hungry or bored, and resting travelers that I'd normally come to expect. People who sought my spiritual wisdom, and had come for something I didn't have to offer. I was sad to disappoint them, but I offered them libations just as I would any other guest, and let them glean whatever they wanted from the experience. Some believed that my wine itself was the source of my seemingly supernatural longevity. I tried to debunk this, remembering what I could from my decade of alcoholism. I offered that I hardly ever drank the wine, and was much more invested in the processes of making it, sometimes waxing poetic about that process. Some came to believe the way I -made- wine was the source of my longevity and begged for my instruction. I

was happy to share my trade, always with the disclaimer that it probably wouldn't extend their life...

...Believe me, if I could have shared my gift I would have given it to my own child who was by then in her 70s. Alma had survived so much, she was weak and missing teeth and patches of hair. Perhaps the visitors were a welcome distraction from a fact I'd put work into avoiding, that it was my destiny to bury my own child. She died peacefully in her sleep, her cause of death was determined to be sleep apnea, a condition that had gone undiagnosed. The optimist in me; filled with guilt. It's related to asthma, I could have guessed, what if we had known? Yet I knew the truth was that she was old, she'd lead a normal life, a good life. She died happy, and left a wonderful child and grandchildren.

## **Chapter 4: Morgan**

Szymon and I had a terse relationship after Alma's death. I think my gift frightened him, and so he grew distant. Adoption is a strange thing, Alma always had a blood family that wasn't my family at all. There was some overlap, and I had been treated kindly, but Szymon and his family fell into the fold of blood ties and forgot me, and I believe, spare me the tragedy of bearing the deaths of my grandkids and great-grandkids. I wasn't alone by any means, but I felt unfit for a family in the conventional sense. I feel guilty even admitting that morning I learned of my daughter's death, I didn't really think about her at all. I went down to the cellar and I thought about yeast, the rise and fall of my hardy little galaxies. I thought about rabbits and people who chose to keep pets who live 12-15 years. I never got a pet because I knew it would only bring me sadness. I regretted my daughter for the same reason.

After her death I fell into a deep depression. Even when visitors came, I'd leave a sign offering they could pick their own grapes and pretend to be out. My house became covered in cloths like a dusty museum archive. First I covered her sculptures, which adorned almost every corner. I couldn't bear to send them away, but I couldn't look at them either. Especially the one she made for my hundredth birthday. How did she capture me so perfectly? It was always an eerie sculpture, beautiful in its way, but too much for me to see after she was gone. In time I covered the other decorations, the furniture, everything reminded me of Alma.

I spent massive amounts of time in bed. Community tried to check on me, and sent doctors when I sent them away. Depression is a sickness like any other, but I found it the hardest to shake. I wondered if I would spend the rest of my life in that fog. I didn't do much to maintain my business or even my vineyard. I didn't even maintain my own health. But gradually, this felt like a losing battle all its own. Even Szymon came to try to talk sense into me. "This isn't wasn't what mom would have wanted." That was a hard truth, but it was what I needed to hear. I took slow,

metered steps back into the world. I would sit for a few hours a day in the sun at my back table, even in winter. I made myself shower. I went through the motions. Then a day came that changed everything.

A Pawnee looking man with a shock of white hair arrived at my back table with an arm full of flowers. Gifts from visitors were not uncommon, although visitors themselves had become less, thinking I must not want them. He introduced himself as Morgan, he had just turned 115 and he jogged about ten miles every morning. Science still hadn't found an explanation for me, so all either of us had to go off was a hunch, but he was intersex, and could confirm we had the same variation. He had come to court me, of all possible things. He told me his story:

Morgan was born shortly after the war into the Pawnee nation. (My community lives under Pawnee jurisdiction, I am Mexican, but not Pawnee). His parents learned he was intersex from a genetic test, and chose to raise him outside the confines of gender. He used neural pronouns throughout his childhood and first marriage. He'd been married three times. First to his childhood sweetheart, he explained that this love was his greatest, but she died tragically young. For a few years Morgan moped and thought that they wouldn't be able to move on, until one day his best friend suggested they start over, reinvent themselves. That was when they decided to take on a woman's role, they began dressing as a woman and doing woman's work. Her family encouraged it, they were happy to see her engaging again.

The very same friend who suggested a reinvention began to sense his feelings for Morgan changing. The two were married a year later, and lived out their lives together. They watched each other's hair turn white. Obviously, Morgan was a romantic, which reminded me of my late daughter in an endearing way. After her husband's death Morgan married again, to a woman of 80, who was older than him by ten years. Their marriage lasted a decade before she too died. He said that it could have lasted ten years or a hundred, it would have ended too soon. Since then Morgan had lived alone, and gradually shifted his identity and presentation to solidly masculine. Most of his life had been spent doing domestic service of some kind. He was very easy to get along with. Unlike me, he wasn't haunted by an intuition of his everlasting gift, he was as surprised by it as the people around him. So he took a new occupation as a historian, and then he'd heard about me, and read everything he could. He admitted his fascination had turned to infatuation. He was excited to meet a kindred spirit.

It was not lost on me that Morgan was fifty years my junior, younger than Alma would be if she was alive, but it also occurred to me that he was also the closest thing available to an age-appropriate partner. He knew my age from the research he had done, even though I'd personally lost track again. I was 170 when I had my first wedding to a 120 year old. Our courtship had been relatively short, but everything felt incredibly relative to both of us. Five years, a decade, it didn't seem to make much difference. We fell in love. Love doesn't know the difference no matter how long you live. I wonder if I too had always been a hopeless romantic, but I'd repressed that side of myself, knowing I might never have an opportunity like the one I found with Morgan. We are still together and I love him desperately.

In a sense, it may not have been our romance, but just the fact that we'd both found another person who experienced time the way we did, that brought out a new vigor in me, and I came to the realization that whether or not I liked it, people listened to me. They came to me for knowledge and advice. I was called many names that were not Szop, in many languages. I am "the great grandmother" that one I don't love, because I often feel like a lousy grandmother and great grandma for that matter "The Oldest", that one I don't mind, it's practical, "Everlasting" that one I'm less and less sure of, but "The Living Ancestor" is my favorite of the titles bestowed, I still advise everyone to just call me Szop, it's my name. Morgan stayed busy with his long morning runs and work as a historian, as I taught many classes on winemaking, and I learned a great deal from each of my students. Teaching deepened my love for the craft, and watching students come and go was sad but also gratifying. Some of my graduates became my closest friends. The stars that made constellations, the galaxies of their lives outside my class. Bloom, grow, fly off into the world. Children who are not my own. Everyone is a child in my eyes.

I am 243 as of this writing, and my dear Morgan is a spry 193. As we predicted, he seems to be aging the same way I have. There is a bittersweet acceptance in the thought that outliving me will probably be his burden. I have developed colon cancer, which I have chosen to treat with chemotherapy. I want to keep living for as long as my body is willing, but I accepted the possibility of my death over 150 years ago, that's enough time to get some perspective and come into a sense of calm acceptance. Morgan and I talk about death easily. No one, no matter how lucky, can see it coming or be ready. Morgan says, and I tend to agree, that it doesn't matter how long a person gets to live, losing them can be a source of tremendous grief.

I take great comfort in knowing there are others like me, not just my Morgan, but many others around the world are experiencing extended lives. All of them share the characteristic of ovotestis which bear no reproductive cells. Most of them are born to nations who have experienced great hardship, as scientists hypothesized, many of the boomers in Palestine, indigenous people of recovering, colonized cultures the world over most of the most of us. I'm sure I wasn't actually the first, I was just the first documented to survive to my full potential. I wonder how the world will be shaped with many of us, living ancestors sharing the history and teaching the world. What a wonderful, curious place blooming with galaxies of generations yet to come.