

21ST-CENTURY GIRL

A child out of time.

BY ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY

“Do you dream of mammoths?” a talk-show host once asked me. I knew not to give him my first choice of answer; that would have enlightened his audience over the course of three and a half hours — so long as they had the basic grounding in biosciences required to understand it. I also knew enough to avoid my second answer, which was that his question was unintelligent, and that the entire interview had taken time I could have spent better in the laboratory.

What I actually said was: “No more than you do,” and the sound that the audience made told me that they liked that. I had gained their sympathy somehow. I couldn’t see precisely the mechanism by which this had happened, but I filed the memory away with all the others, my empirical evidence of the human condition by which I attempt to govern my social interaction with my fellow hominids.

Another one I get is: “You must have had a difficult childhood.” That throws me because it isn’t a question, and so you can’t really answer it. It’s a statement, to which the only response, if response is even required, is: “Yes.” Of course I must. Why say the obvious, except that interviews are all about them saying the obvious, and me replying with lies and simplifications because that is, I have learned, what they want to hear.

When I was 15, my foster-parents took me aside for The Talk. The bulk of my difficult childhood was behind me, although I had yet to learn most of the coping strategies I now rely on. I was essentially friendless, more comfortable interacting online than off, an academic overachiever and unable to understand why that didn’t come with the positive social pay-off that I had been led to expect. I didn’t like crowds or strangers much. My world was comfortable with only a few other people in it.

No different, really, from hundreds of other children across the world.

I had thought that I knew what The Talk was going to be. They had never said, but I knew I wasn’t their natural offspring, by deduction from first principles. I didn’t look like them. I was built differently, and I’d spent ages looking at my face in the mirror, tracing the contours of nose and chin and forehead.

I was a striking girl. People who know about me now say I’m ugly, but that’s a judgement influenced by their foreknowledge — they think I *should* be ugly, and so they recast my features in that unflattering light.

Striking, is the word I prefer. Not even unique, if



you take each feature on its own. Not resembling my foster-parents, though.

I know, I told them. *I’m adopted*. They were unsure how to proceed. I could see that this was not, in fact, what The Talk was to be about. Perhaps I shouldn’t have said anything, but that is something I still have difficulties with: knowing when to withhold knowledge. It seems so counter-intuitive to do so.

We had The Talk, at last. I wonder how many other disaffected, unsociable children wait for just that revelation: *you are something special; there is a reason why you are not like them*. The Talk was about adoption, in a way, about telling me who my parents were. My mother was stem-cell research and my father was gene sequencing.

When I was 20, and had been accepted for my doctorate, I made the decision to go public. You will recall the media storm. Nobody knew quite what to do with me. The geneticists behind my genesis

➔ **NATURE.COM**
Follow Futures on
Facebook at:
go.nature.com/mtoodm

had done something unethical, and yet at the same time their detractors wanted to study

me. There were legal battles, in which I was a determined participant. If I was to be a test subject, stripped of human rights, then at the same time my reviled creators were guilty of nothing more than making a *thing*. Alternatively, if they had broken the boundaries of professional ethics, then it could only be because I was a human being.

In having me raised among their own kind, in showing that I was intellectually, and at least borderline socially, functional, they sealed their own professional fate and secured mine. They must have known.

They have been forgiven, since, because genius is too valuable a quality to waste. As for me ...

I did not go into my current discipline purely because of my unique past. I became a geneticist because it is an area in which my cognitive strengths shine. My ability to find patterns in complex data, and to focus without distraction on the small details of my work, is as apposite for the minutiae of modelling gene-sequencing outcomes as it would have been for the painstaking production of exacting stone tools. In fact, the further I progress in my profession, the more I meet people who are just like me, despite our different heritages — and the less our different heritages matter in any meaningful way.

I will have sisters, soon, and brothers, as close to me as blood-kin. That project is proceeding specifically because I have been more than a success: I and my people have valuable intellectual traits that the world can use. I am not working on that team, though. I have other genomes to sequence, other verdicts of history to reverse.

And still people want to know, “What’s it like, being you? What is it like to be brought back, to be taken from your proper time?” And I answer that this is my time, that I am a child of the twenty-first century. And if I, *Homo sapiens neoneanderthalensis*, did not evolve to live in cities and use the Internet and make advances in the field of genetics, then neither did *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and we will both have to make do.

And why would I need to dream of mammoths when these days I can step out of my office and just watch them? ■

Adrian Tchaikovsky was born in Lincolnshire, studied psychology and zoology at Reading and now practises law in Leeds. More of his work can be found at www.shadowsoftheapt.com.

JACEY