

SWEET SERENDIPITY P. 26

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How to Find One in a Million

Nature, Nurture or What?

Why You Act Like Your Great-Great-Grandfather

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BY ELLEN NOTBOHM

Fate doesn't play fair. For one family historian, that's the driving force behind celebrating the life of a relative who died long before his game was up.



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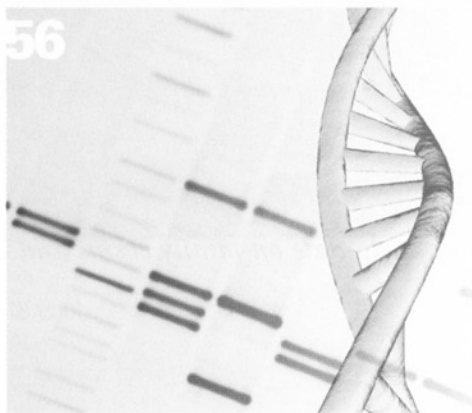
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Maybe it's a message from the afterlife or just our over-active imaginations, but does it ever seem like an ancestor wants to be found?

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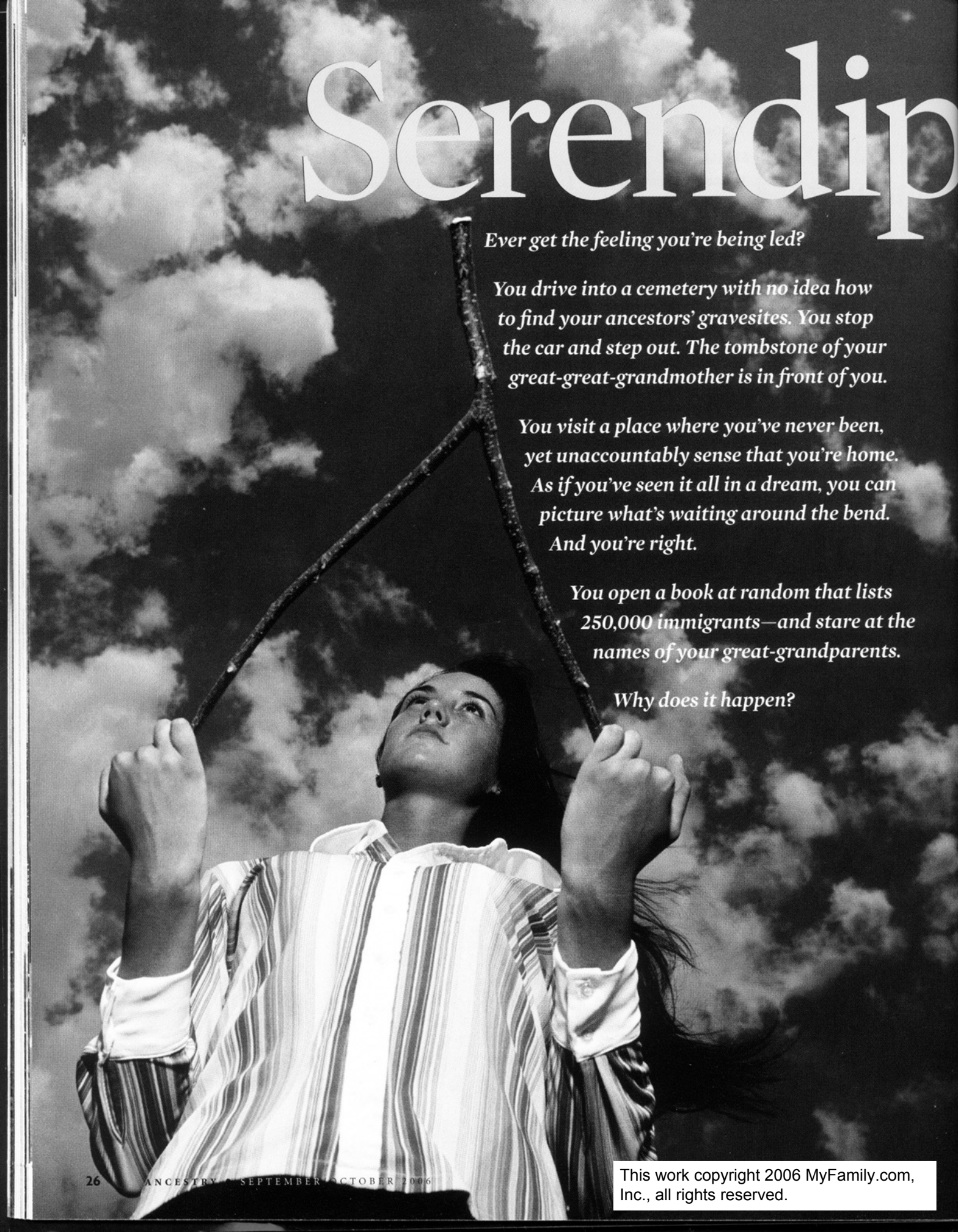
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Now's the perfect time
to plant spring bulbs and
the seeds of research.



Serendip

Ever get the feeling you're being led?

You drive into a cemetery with no idea how to find your ancestors' gravesites. You stop the car and step out. The tombstone of your great-great-grandmother is in front of you.

You visit a place where you've never been, yet unaccountably sense that you're home. As if you've seen it all in a dream, you can picture what's waiting around the bend. And you're right.

You open a book at random that lists 250,000 immigrants—and stare at the names of your great-grandparents.

Why does it happen?



BY JENNIE KAUFMAN

HENRY Z “HANK” JONES, GENEALOGIST, lecturer, and former actor, calls this “the Twilight Zone of genealogy.” He has collected hundreds of such stories for a pair of books, *Psychic Roots* and *More Psychic Roots*, and he can’t stop collecting them—he’s up to 1,300 now.

“This is an area filled with charlatans,” Hank acknowledges, but in the tales he collects—ones in which serendipitous events encompass everything from lucky breaks to ghostly encounters—“there is a core that is really amazing,” he says. “And a lot of times these things happen to people who pride themselves on being logical.”

Twisting Fate

Joyce A. Fleming Kelley’s family history pursuits were no secret in her workplace. So when a co-worker’s husband picked up a book at an estate sale that included the Baker surname—a family name that resided in Joyce’s and her husband’s lines—the colleague asked Joyce if she wanted to see the book. Joyce, of course, said yes.

On her lunch break, Joyce began looking through the book. When she reached page six, “I about fell off my chair,” she says. The family tree began with Francis Baker, born in 1611—a direct ancestor of Joyce’s husband.

“I couldn’t believe that it came into my hands,” Joyce says. She can’t explain how it happened, but on one point she is firm: “I don’t believe it was coincidence. I think this book was put into my hands by more than coincidence.”

Encountering Chances

How important is serendipity to genealogy? Says Hank, “It’s a big part of life.” And being open to these experiences, he believes, is “part of your life’s journey.”

Willingness to journey is also important. Diane Raymond of Champaign, Illinois, once held a job in which she cleaned houses after estate sales. In one house, Diane found a trove of papers she couldn’t bear to throw out. “The bank considered them worthless,” she says. “I didn’t.”

The find included photographs, news clippings, a diary that began in 1937, and a journal of correspondence over

the years compiled by a woman named Mabel Moore. Diane started reading the diary and its descriptions of daily life, and the people in it “became like my family,” she says. She held onto the documents for years. Then, on a whim one Memorial Day, Diane and her husband decided they would try to locate the family from the diary.

The couple drove 200 miles to the tiny town where the Moores had lived. “It took a good long time to get there,” Diane remembers. When they arrived, they found none of the addresses mentioned in the journal were still there. But they found the church, which had a cemetery alongside, full of Memorial Day visitors. Diane and her husband located some Moore headstones and came upon a well-dressed couple—Mabel’s family. Mabel was still alive, they said, though elderly and frail.

Diane went to her car, retrieved the papers and photos, and spread them on the ground. “I was just about in tears,” she says; the family was ecstatic.

Drawing Luck

Diane believes that fate made her decide to look for the family on that particular day. But, as Hank likes to point out with the help of a quote from Louis Pasteur, “Chance favors only the prepared mind.”

“Genealogy,” says Hank, “is still a science. Everything has to be backed up with a source.” Had Joyce not done her homework, she would have never known about the Baker surname in her husband’s line. If Diane hadn’t already familiarized herself with the Moore family, she may have never known where to look for a connection to the family.

Still, serendipity *was* integral to the final successes of both researchers. Lesson learned? “If you get a hunch, follow it,” says Hank, who, himself, no longer asks why certain events just seem to happen, dropping us in the right place at the right time with the right frame of mind. “Just believe this stuff happens and enjoy it,” he says. “Our ancestors want to be remembered.”

JENNIE KAUFMAN is a writer and editor in Brooklyn, New York.

Seren-delving into the Future

THERE WAS A TIME when Megan Smolenyak thought her great-grandfather was the only Smolenyak ever to come to America. But when phone books went online in the early 1990s, she did a search and began cold-calling other Smolenyaks, each of whom referred her to Mike Smolenak, the family historian. The two began sharing notes, created a newsletter, held reunions, and developed “a full-fledged village association,” she says.

Megan, a professional genealogist, author (you’ll find her column, “Found,” on page 48 of *Ancestry Magazine*), and lecturer, eventually traced the Smolenyaks to the 1700s and learned that there are only four Smolenyak families in the world, all from the same village in Slovakia.

In the mid-1990s, someone new started showing up at Smolenyak reunions: Mike’s cousin Brian. “The first time I met him, I dumped a foot of data on him,” Megan says—

he was the only other Smolenyak born the same year she was. They assumed they were distant relatives, but going back more than 200 years, they found no connection. In 1999, they started dating.

When DNA testing became available in early 2001, the couple was among the first in line. They learned that they are not related genetically—in fact, none of the four Smolenyak families are related. Most couples of European background “are kissing cousins of some kind,” Megan says, but she and Brian are about as distant as they can be.

Genetic tests aside, at Megan and Brian’s wedding in 2001, Megan brought along family trees as proof, just in case authorities suspected they’d chosen New Zealand for their wedding as a means of evading the law. But, says Megan, “the Kiwis were really cool. Nobody blinked an eye.”

Kismet or dumb luck?

**You decide
whether fate
or forgotten
detective work
was to blame
as *Ancestry
Magazine*
readers offer
their own
brushes with
serendipity.**

My husband and I were looking for an unmapped cemetery when we spotted a little sign for it on the side of the road. We drove up the dirt road—apparently someone’s driveway—that eventually turned into little more than two-ruts. Finally we stopped to walk. The cemetery, we discovered, was spread out over the top of the hill, but we had no map of the plots and there was no one around. When we came to an area with big rock steps going down the hill, I gave up, telling my husband I’d write to the cemetery to get information instead. My husband persisted, going down a little way to see if he could find anything. Finally, the terrain got the best of him, too, and he gave up. As he turned to come back up the hill, he read the tombstone in front of him—*William G. Roberts 1854–1928, a kind man*—one of the family members we were looking for, with the rest of his family. They weren’t going to let us leave without something.

KATHY ROBERTS

I had a dream in which Gran, my grandmother who passed in 1986, is standing at the foot of my bed with four other people—two are Gran’s parents, the other two an elderly couple whom Gran introduces as her in-laws, my German great-grandparents, John and Rachel. I look at everyone in amazement, this dream is so vivid.

Rachel firmly tells me “It is time to work on us now” and everyone nods in agreement. I tell Gran that I need help with this since I don’t have much information. She nods. Dream over.

That weekend I go through Gran’s papers and my notes. I call my Aunt Jen to ask her what she remembers about John and Rachel, and she tells me that I must have Gran’s photos of them. I disagree. She insists and proceeds to give me detailed information about the pictures—she remembers the photos being taken when she was about three. I go through Gran’s photos and there they are, John and Rachel, just as Aunt Jen described and just as I saw in my dreams.

LAURIE GALBO