

DONNA'S DNA

A LIMITED SERIES

(SIX EPISODES)

STORY BIBLE

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People love researching their family ancestry. They log on to Ancestry and Family Search in the digital equivalent of looking for past lives. They take DNA samples and use them to track down distant family members, in search of connections and stories. Most people probably hope to find a connection to Queen Elizabeth or Genghis Khan, in the same way that past life searchers always hope they're the reincarnation of Cleopatra.

But what if you went searching for relatives and instead of finding a fairy tale fantasy, you found a dark secret? What then? What do you do with that information? What does it say about who you are?

That premise inspired this story—as did my own trek through Ancestry dot com. My family's dark secret? In more than two hundred years of Catholics, I uncovered two Protestants. Well, a Quaker and a Protestant, but you know what I mean—people have gone to war for less.

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Synopsis

Donna has grown up quiet and cosseted by her foster parents, an elderly couple who raised her in their Quaker tradition where she learned not to ask too many questions but merely accept what came to her. All that changes the night of college graduation, when her boyfriend Richie proposes.

Richie's proposal is both good news and bad news for Donna. Good news in that she loves him—they've been college sweethearts since freshmen year. But bad news because Richie's DAR mom (Daughters of the American Revolution) immediately starts asking questions about Donna's family, questions she's unable to answer since her parents died when she was six years old.

And, this being 1979, the answers are not easy to come by.

So when Donna learns that her mother is from a small town in Northern Ireland, she and her best friend Molly set off for what becomes a backpacking odyssey through Europe, searching for clues and stories about her relatives, while learning to reconcile her fairy tale fantasy of her dead parents with their immigrant realities.

Donna's odyssey takes her from Northern Ireland, the epicenter of the Irish "troubles" in 1979, through France and into Italy, where she finally confronts the difference between the DNA she's inherited and the direction in which she's headed.

Donna's DNA is a classic coming-of-age story about family and those who become family; a story about lost ancestors and new loves, immigration and second chances; and a story about friendship and the journey along the road.

Story World

Donna's DNA is set in 1979, at the tail end of the hippie and hostel travels through Western Europe and for that matter around the world. All that kind of travel would change in November of 1979 with the taking of the hostages in Iran, and in early 1980 with the swearing-in of Ronald Reagan and the emergence of yuppies, Wall Street and MBAs. But 1979 still carried a last whiff of innocence.

The story is also deliberately set in this time period because there was no Internet. So for Donna to research her lineage she has to go to the countries where her parents were born. In addition, technology had not yet evolved to the point where people could call overseas very easily, so travelers in Europe would have to go to American Express offices and post offices in order to be able to phone home to the United States. This reality poses additional challenges in communication for the travelers in this story.

Northern Ireland in the late '70s was at the height of "The Troubles", the violent sectarian clashes between Protestants and Catholics in the North of Ireland. Derry was the very epicenter of that struggle, and that makes it an intriguing starting place for two American girls who've never been outside of their country and who are unaware of the battles.

Paris because... And anyway, all roads and all train stations lead out of Paris through the rest of France. Marseille in the 70's was a city on the constant edge of a knife fight, a city in the thrall of drug dealers and crime bosses, making it a perfect place for an innocent American girl to land and get herself in trouble.

Giudecca is a tiny Island across the canal from Venice, a place most people don't even know exists. It's smaller, less touristy, and more easily navigable for someone who's researching information—there are maybe 10 churches in Giudecca vs. some 200 in Venice. Finally, Tuscany was still a land undiscovered by American travel and romcom writers. If anybody drank Italian wine in those days it was most likely Chianti

in a straw bottle! So Tuscany was also still relatively undiscovered and not a region heavily traveled by Americans.

Donna and her best friend have just graduated and don't have a lot of money, which is why they travel by train from place to place (with the ubiquitous Eurail pass) and why they stay in inexpensive youth hostels. Youth hostels are also a great place to set the story because kids who travel there meet up with other people quite easily and form fast friendships which opens the door to new adventures and possibilities.

Structure

Donna's DNA was originally written as a six-act screenplay, each act another step along the journey. As such it lends itself easily to a limited six-part episodic series:

1. Philadelphia to Northern Ireland
2. Northern Ireland to Paris
3. Paris to Marseille
4. Giudecca / Venice
5. Tuscany part 1
6. Tuscany part 2 and epilogue

Key Characters

Donna Flowers. Buttoned down collar, buttoned up shirt, everything about Donna is sewn tight. She's clean and neat, wears a headband in her blonde hair, blue eye shadow, frosted pink lipstick and Fair Isle sweaters. She listens to The Carpenters, follows the rules and in fact if this story hadn't happened to her, she would have gone on to marry a wealthy Philadelphia lawyer and live an insignificant life.

Donna is cautious and quiet by nature and these characteristics were reinforced by the deaths of her parents, Rose and Lorenzo Flowers, when she was six. Donna was a solitary but happy child, and a content but quiet college student, socializing mostly under the guidance of her best friend Molly or her boyfriend Richie (never together—Molly and Richie can't stand each other).

Donna doesn't remember much, if anything, about her parents. All of their records were lost in the house fire so she has quietly fantasized her whole life about who they might have been. She secretly feels that if she knew that she could feel more secure about who she is—not that she'd ever say anything to the Taylors, that would seem ungrateful. Molly is the only one who knows about Donna's hunger to know more about her parents.

Like most teenagers, she tried on different personas, settling on Grace Kelly as a role model (another Philadelphia girl). In her room she'd practice Grace Kelly's very un-Philadelphia accent and as an adult she still drops into it when she's feeling insecure.

She's also always secretly wondered why the Taylors never actually adopted her—that lack of finality made her uncertain about her future, which is one of the reasons she's in love with Richie. Richie loves her, he wants to marry her and he comes from a long, long line of Lockridges—they're DAR after all. Marrying Richie will not only net Donna a secure future, it will give her a new past to which she can lay claim as her own. And it will give her, finally, a real family.

Molly Grimner. Pretty and vivacious, Molly knows instinctively it's better to act first and apologize later. And she doesn't ever really apologize much. An only child, Molly bonded quickly with Donna and spent a lot of time at her house since her own mother held a full-time job, a true rarity in their Main Line neighborhood in the '60s and '70s. Her parents have raised her to be strong and independent and buffeted by the winds of feminism blowing through society in the '70s, Molly has grown to be all that and more. She adores Donna, who is her emotional rock and feels duty bound to get Donna to break free. And that includes dumping Richie.

Richie Lockridge. Popped-collar prep, it's clear that Richie will eventually grow up to be a didactic, narcissistic Wall Street wanker. But right now he's still a cute, blonde college boy who's devoted to Donna (mostly because she's very pretty and also easy to control), loves the beach, has a mean backhand, and has mapped out his future in two year increments.

The Taylors. Devoutly Quaker, the Taylors were never able to have children. They're moved when they read the story of Donna's parents dying in a house fire, of there being no other relatives on record, of the little girl left all alone. They volunteer to foster her and when they bring the six year old Donna home, they fall in love with her. At that point they're already in their early 60's, making them closer to being grandparents than parents. They love Donna deeply and want only what's best for her.

Theresa Dougherty. Donna's Irish cousin is a lot like Molly in her attitude and outlook on life. Theresa wants nothing more than to escape the confines of her small town in Northern Ireland. She's grown up listening to stories of Donna's mother, who ran away at 16 and got the hell out. Theresa intends to follow suit.

Francoise and Lucia. Sometimes when you're travelling you meet people with whom you connect, people who volunteer to buy you a meal, or help you with language or point you in the right direction. You may never see them again, but you'll always remember them. Francoise is one of them, Lucia is another.

Giuseppe (aka Joseph) Ambrogi. What is it about Italian men that they age so well?? All that black hair going silver around the temples, that dark skin tanning so beautifully in the sun. That will be Joseph when he's older, but he's already showing signs of promise in his late 20's. Tallish and slender, slightly formal in his manner, sensual in his movements and a way of looking at Donna that, well, makes her wonder what kissing him would be like.

Episode Guide

Episode 1. We open to a family dinner, a celebration in progress—an engagement. The family is blurred in the background as the camera pans photo after photo on a long shelf. A man asks if he can hear the mother's family story now that he's marrying into the family—her daughter has told him it's a great one. The mother laughs, there is general teasing, and then the mother begins.

Fade into college graduation day, May, 1979. A warm, sunny well-heeled afternoon on Philadelphia's Main Line. Donna Flowers is in the crowd of grads, alongside her college sweetheart, Richie Lockridge. Donna is a local girl while Richie is from Greenwich, Connecticut. But this geography doesn't matter—Richie is in love and intent on proving it. The moment they switch their tassels he goes down on one knee and proposes to Donna. He loves her madly BUT he thinks she should be formally adopted by her foster parents, the Taylors, before they marry so that she can be properly introduced to his parents' friends. After all, he wouldn't want Greenwich to think she's a girl with no heritage.

The Taylors are circumspect in their congratulations, while Donna's best friend Molly is flat out negative. She can't stand Richie. Molly has been besties and neighbors with Donna since Donna came to live with the Taylors and she thinks Richie is a drip and she can't imagine why anyone would want to get married so young—she's a woman's libber and intends to have as much fun as she can before she settles down.

After the graduation party that night, the Taylors sit Donna down and reveal that the orphanage where she spent time after her parents died has recently closed. Old files have been forwarded to them, including information about Donna's mother. Her name was Rose Dougherty and she was born outside of Derry, in the North of Ireland. With the file came a string of pearls that belonged to Rose, and these the Taylors give to Donna. The Taylors encourage Donna to travel to Ireland to see if she can learn more about her mother's family before she starts one of her own. Donna, afraid of what she might find, demurs. She has a house

at the beach with Richie this summer, a job at a big accounting firm lined up after Labor Day—all these plans can't be easily changed. But when Molly learns of the proposed trip, she eggs on Donna and says she'll join her. Richie is less than enthusiastic—again, she could just be adopted by the Taylors, who have a good family lineage, and be done with it. Plus, he wants to get started planning the wedding. Torn, Donna decides to go for two weeks—if she can't learn anything in that time, then she'll come home and forget about it. Molly whoops her support and starts planning.

The girls arrive in Derry and check into a hostel that is surrounded by British soldiers, their first eye-opening view of the bigger world. The next day they take a bus out to the rural town of Dungiven, Donna's mother's birthplace. Donna is clutching a photo of her parents—the only one she's ever had—and she's wearing her mother's pearl choker.

A chance encounter in a pub leads to the introduction of a crowd of Dougherty cousins, who are delighted to meet their American cousin. One of the Dougherty's is Theresa, a spunky girl Donna's age with whom she immediately connects. Another is Brendan, a charming Irishman with whom Molly immediately connects. Donna's in heaven—she has a family! Cousins who love her! And her mother apparently has a brother and sister still living, Tom and Bernadette. But the cousins suddenly go mum when Donna asks to meet them. Theresa and Brendan drive Donna and Molly back to Derry and tell them to sit tight while they set up an introduction to the "old-heads". Left to their own devices, Donna and Molly explore Derry—and wonder why the intro needs to be handled with kid gloves. After all, she's family, isn't she?

Episode Two. Finally! Donna has been invited to meet Bernadette, her mother's older sister. Leaving Molly in Derry, Donna goes back to Dungiven in high spirits, planning how to get all of her new Irish cousins to come to her wedding. Her fantasy is shattered by her encounter with Bernadette, a mean Irishwoman with a pinched face and a

nasty disposition. Bernadette trash talks Rose, telling Donna her mother ran out on her own sick mother and didn't come back until the funeral—after which she took off again for Belfast, leaving behind her ailing father. Bernadette implies that Rose not only was a selfish and thoughtless girl, she also apparently spent a lot of time with the American soldiers who were stationed in Belfast during and after WW2. In fact, Bernadette calls Rose a tramp and calls into question who Donna's real father is.

Donna is devastated and in tears and leaves, encountering her cousin Theresa on the way out. Theresa has brought her own mother, Sheila, who married Rose's brother Tom. Sheila was also Rose's best friend. Sheila sits with Donna and tells her loving stories about Rose and how they grew up. She has copies of letters that Rose wrote her from America, and pictures as well.

Sheila's kindness and stories salve the wound that Bernadette opened. But...Sheila doesn't exactly deny the rumors either. Sheila says she never met Donna's father, Larry Flowers, but she knows he sailed from Marseille in 1950, the same year Rose sailed from Belfast. And they met in Philadelphia, while working on an old Main Line estate. However, Sheila adds, Rose had told her that Larry was originally from Italy, even though Flowers doesn't sound very Italian.

Back in Derry, Donna learns from another hostel traveler that there is something called the National Archives in Paris, and the Archives contain records of just about everything in France. Donna figures maybe she can look through the records to learn more about her father's life in Marseille. Molly is totally game for going to Paris, hell yeah!

But once again Richie is opposed. He wants her home. She pushes back saying the two weeks aren't up yet. And the next day, Molly and Donna take a ferry from Belfast to Cherbourg in France. From Cherbourg the girls make their way to Paris, with plans on doing the town as well as researching the records.

But a sudden telegram from Molly parents ordering her home threatens to derail Donna's search. Donna has to decide whether she should go back with Molly or continue her quest on her own.

Episode Three. Donna's decision to stay on causes a blow-up in her friendship with Molly, but they reconcile before Molly has to leave. Donna, on her own for the first time in her life, is befriended by a group of European students at the hostel who take her out and show her around.

Donna also connects with an older Frenchwoman named Francoise who volunteers to help Donna with her quest and the French language. But when they arrive at the National Archives, it's closed. The workers are on strike and there's no telling how long it will last. Francoise encourages Donna to hang out and enjoy Paris, which, with the help of others in the hostel, she does. But the strike goes on beyond her two-week window and Donna and Richie end up in a huge fight. The strike goes on longer and they reconcile. When the archives open, Donna finds—nothing. Nothing except the information that all of the ship's passenger records are in Marseille, the point of embarkation. So Donna buys a Eurail pass and heads out on an overnight train to Marseille.

On the train she meets fellow travelers, including some Italians who inform her that her father's name in Italian is Lorenzo Fioralle. Armed with this information, Donna arrives in Marseille. In 1979 Marseille is still a city bombed out by WW2 and currently run by drug cartels. It's not a place for innocents abroad, so Donna goes directly from the train station to the City Hall.

It doesn't take long for her to find her father's name on the ship's manifest as well as his birthplace, a small island called Giudecca across the channel from Venice. Donna is thrilled! Now she knows who she is. But wait, there's a note next to her father's name. She goes back to the archives clerk and asks what the mark is. He says the mark means there was a warrant for Lorenzo's arrest. Donna is shocked, but

what for? The clerk shrugs. Who knows, he says callously, he was Italian and living in Marseille—he was probably a petty thief, many Italians are. Donna is broken-hearted. She calls Richie from the local post office, tells him her search is over. She wants to forget everything she's learned—her mother's sexual escapades, her father's criminal past. She's done, she's going back to Philadelphia and marrying Richie and taking his name. Richie, relieved, offers to send her a ticket home.

On the way back to the hostel she scores several bottles of wine and gets herself thoroughly drunk. Marseille is not a popular stop on the college travel circuit, so Donna drinks herself into oblivion all by herself. When she's way past the point of common sense, Donna is joined by an older American traveler. She's too drunk to sense the danger in him and ends up in bed with him. When she gets back to her room she discovers he's tried to rob her pearl choker. She confronts him and he returns the necklace, but warns her, in a very menacing way, to be more careful. That does it, she can't sleep a wink and sits up all night by herself, scared and wondering what she's gotten herself into.

In the morning she goes to the American Express office to wait for the ticket home that Richie is sending her. She's there for hours and while she's waiting a letter arrives from the Taylors. They encourage her to keep going, no matter how painful it might be. They tell her they support her quest, that they love her no matter what. Sometime later, the ticket arrives from Richie and Donna goes to the train station, with the intent of boarding the overnight train back to Paris and the airport. But while she waits she re-reads the Taylor's letter. When her train is called she goes to the departures board and sees her train platform number—then she sees a train headed for Venice. She stares down at the ticket in her hand and back up to the departures board. Which way will Donna go?

Episode Four. Donna arrives in sunny, beautiful Venice—an antidote to her experiences in Marseille. On her vaporetto ride across the lagoon, she takes off her engagement ring, and slips it into her pocket. No matter what happens next, she knows this is irretrievably broken.

Donna makes her way to the youth hostel in Guidecca and is befriended by an Aussie traveler named Ellen. Ellen has been on the road for nine months and she's leaving in a few days to work the grape harvest in Tuscany, so she offers to show Donna around the island. They meet up with Lucia, who grew up on the island and when Donna shares her story, Lucia volunteers to help her with her search.

Lucia and Donna start going in and out of the ten or so churches on the island, looking for baptismal certificates or someone who may have known the Fioralle family. At their second to the last church, a cleaning woman pulls Lucia aside and whispers something to her—there is a nun in the convent on the island who has this information.

Lucia and Donna make their way to the convent, only to learn that it's cloistered, meaning that the nuns withdraw from the world and take vows of silence for 20 hours a day. The girls present themselves anyway and the Mother Superior hears them out, then directs them to a visiting room, where guests may interact with the nuns while they sit behind screens. A nun appears behind a screen—Lucia translates—this is Sister Maria. Lucia tells Donna's story and Sister Maria listens and then tells Lucia that Donna must come alone the next day and she will hear the whole story.

The next day when Donna returns, the Mother Superior is there as well and she translates Sister Maria's story as she tells it. Sister Maria tells Donna that her father's mother—her Nonna or grandmother—was raped by a priest on the island when she was 17. This was the 1920's and there was no recourse for Maria, so she went away to have the baby and when she returned, she raised the boy Lorenzo herself. When Lorenzo came of age and wanted to fight in the war, he went to his mother and asked who his father was. She told him the truth. Lorenzo was angry—young, angry and impetuous. He went to the church and

confronted the priest. There was an argument and Lorenzo struck the priest, his father. The priest hit his head on a marble altar and died.

Donna is shocked—her father killed his own father? This can't be true!

The Mother Superior hushes her and Sister Maria continues the story. Lorenzo's mother helped him run away to Marseille, where she had relatives. He wrote to her faithfully but he could not visit because there was a warrant for his arrest. Eventually he saved enough money to sail for America, where he continued to write to her. He married, a girl from Ireland he said, and they had a baby girl named Donna Maria, after her grandmother. Lorenzo sent pictures.

Donna is beside herself. She has a grandmother who never acknowledged her? Not possible, none of this is true! Why would Sister Maria make such things up??? Sister Maria tells her, I am the mother of Lorenzo. I am your grandmother.

Donna explodes in anger and accusations. All these years she didn't know who she was or where she was from, and Sister Maria, who knew all about her, never came looking for her, just abandoned her. Donna shouts at her, you're not my family! I have a family, it's the Taylors! And she runs out of the convent.

The next day Donna wanders Venice, unsure what to do with what's she heard. She's too embarrassed to even call Molly, she's too heartbroken to talk to the Taylors and Richie—well, that ship has sailed. Bereft, alone, Donna wanders, trying to figure out where she should go and what she should do, especially since she's running out of money. It's now August and her two week trip has turned into two months. She tries to hock her pearl necklace—she doesn't want it anymore—but learns it's not that valuable. So Donna decides to sell her engagement ring to fund whatever comes next.

That night, when it seems things couldn't get any worse, a group of gypsy thieves hit the hostel and rip everyone off. All of Donna's money is stolen. She's out of money and out of options.

But Lucia reminds her there is work to be had and money to be earned in the vineyards—she is joining Ellen the next day and invites Donna long. Lucia's cousin takes them to the mainland in his boat and the girls start hitchhiking to Tuscany.

Episode Five.

Donna and Lucia arrive in Greve, in Tuscany. There they meet up with Ellen and several other travelers from the hostel—including an attractive Italian man named Giuseppe (in English, Joseph) who is the field crew director. Donna is assigned to a crew and early the next morning she begins picking grapes by hand. It's a dirty, hot job—the sun in Tuscany in August beats down relentlessly, there's no shade in the fields.

Donna falls asleep early every night, sometimes crying herself to sleep at the thought of everything she's lost. Richie's nasty letters don't help—he writes telling her he wants his money back, that she's nothing, a no one. Which is exactly how Donna feels.

Molly writes constantly, begging her to come home and take the job she was offered before graduation—they can share an apartment in the city, forget what's happened in Italy and Ireland. But the Taylors continue to encourage her to take her time and stay as long as she needs and it's their advice that wins out.

Eventually the vendage is over—Ellen heads out for a new country, Lucia back to Giudecca and Giuseppe to Florence, where he studies. But Donna has fallen in love with the vendage and she moves on to another farm. She makes her way across the region and learns quickly, becoming a field crew director in no time. Giuseppe returns one weekend to help in the vineyard and the two strike up a flirtatious relationship. But he's gone at the end of the weekend and Donna is back by herself—which is actually okay.

And then one evening a knock at her door turns out to be Theresa! Inspired by Donna's travels, Theresa has come to join her cousin and

earn enough money to go to America. The cousins work together for a month, talking in the evenings about Donna's mother, father and Nonna. Theresa is the one who finally forces Donna to acknowledge the ugliness of Maria's situation—raped by a priest, poor and nowhere to turn. She says she can't blame Lorenzo for picking a fight with a priest like that. Donna finally begins to confront the worlds her parents were fleeing and what they built when they got to America—new lives, new loves, new family.

In the meantime Donna has written to the Taylors and they have invited Theresa to come and stay with them. But still Donna will stay put. She drives Theresa to the station and waves her off—and then she decides to drop in on Giuseppe in Florence. They begin a relationship, going back and forth between Greve and Florence, but Donna cannot commit to anything. She has shared her story with Giuseppe, who says she is not so different from her parents—she is an immigrant, someone who has left their own country in search of a better life. His insight makes Donna pensive and she finally begins to lay down her anger at her parents.

Episode Six.

Clearing out the angry emotions allows Donna the energy to finally focus on her own story—where will she go from here? What life will she create for herself, independent of what her parents did? The answer becomes clear—she will study viticulture and eventually run her own vineyard. And she will study in Tuscany—Giuseppe is in the middle of a PhD program at the University in Florence and has a while to go before he finishes. So Donna will stay, though she will make many trips back to Philadelphia to visit with the Taylors. She understands finally that she has many families—her foster parents, her Irish cousins, her parents and maybe eventually Giuseppe. But she still rejects Sister Maria—she can't forgive her for abandoning her.

One night in November, Donna and Joseph are at their flat in Florence when they learn that the American Embassy has been stormed and Americans held hostage. As an American living abroad, she feels vulnerable. She and Joseph talk about it and he points out that her Nonna faced a scary situation without the kind of support that she has. He says he feels sorry for Maria—her only option was to withdraw from the world. And, he says, Maria's disappearance into a convent of silence was not unlike Donna's own refusal to ask questions as she was growing up...

A month later, before she returns to the Taylors for Christmas, Donna pays a visit to Sister Maria in Giudecca. Maria tells Donna that the pearls she wears were once hers. They were given to her by a boy who wanted to marry her...before she was raped by the priest. She gave them to Lorenzo when he fled, so he could cash them in for money as needed. But Lorenzo held on to them and instead gave them to Rose, and now Donna has them—and has started to wear them again. Maria smiles at her gently and Donna feels the connection, is finally able to forgive her Nonna. She reaches out for Maria's hand and says, "Buon Natale, Nonna."

We come back to the present, and to the U.S. The family around the table is riveted by the story. We see that the woman who has been telling it is Donna and the man at the other end of the table is Joseph/Giuseppe. The other people at the table reveal themselves to be their children Paolo, Rose and Terry and Terry's fiancé Sam, as well as Donna's cousin Theresa, there with her husband. The silence is interrupted by the arrival of an ever boisterous Molly—along with her husband Brendan, Theresa's brother.

The family toasts Terry and Sam's engagement and then they toast each other and the missing family members—and finally, they raise a glass and toast their ancestors, Rose and Lorenzo.