

After getting his DNA results, he messaged a stranger: I think you might be my father



Family resemblance? Joseph Arriaga, left, and Robert “Bobby” Parker in Riverside in May.

(Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

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One evening last fall, after his three young children went to bed, Joseph Arriaga sat at his laptop and sent a Facebook message to a stranger.

*“Hello Robert. My name is Joseph,” it began. “I was born in 1992.”*

So many of Arriaga's defining memories had built toward this message. There was the time, around third grade, when a cousin blurted that Arriaga wasn't truly part of their family. The strained follow-up conversations with his mother. His recent gamble in mailing a sample of saliva to Ancestry.com.

In launching his search, Arriaga, 29, was trying to sort out truth from family folklore, attempting to verify or disprove a story about his paternity — a story that had filled him with anger and shame for years. Would a DNA match lead him to a dead man or a felon, or perhaps to a friendly face whose features he'd recognize as his own? Or would he find anyone at all?

But now, in the evening stillness of his Riverside home, Arriaga stared down at a man's profile picture on Facebook and worried that the message he was about to send would blow up his life.

*"I've done a great deal of research," he wrote, "and I think you might be my biological father."*

Arriaga's high-stakes quest offered the potential to enrich or devastate — and certainly alter — the lives of several people involved.

His inspiration grew out of a clarifying conversation with his English-professor-turned-mentor, in whom he'd confided the complicated story of his birth — a tale he had begun to question. The two often dissected the work of American philosopher William James, discussing how the narrative surrounding something shapes the way we see it, how revising a story can change how it affects us.

There was a key narrative Arriaga needed to sort out — his own — so with encouragement and investigative help from his wife, he launched the months-long process that would shift the dynamics of two families and ultimately free him from a heaviness that had shaped his life.

It was 10:44 p.m. in Gainesville, Fla., and Robert "Bobby" Parker, 52, had just set down his book for the night. His wife was already asleep and he decided to make one final scroll through Facebook. He read the message from Joseph Arriaga. It gave him chills.

The next morning, Parker asked his wife, Lee Kirby, to sit down.

“I need to talk to you.”

Three decades ago, he told her, a woman he’d dated in graduate school had gotten pregnant and eventually told him the baby was his. He’d met the baby boy, but lost touch after the boy’s mother moved away.

He’d tried unsuccessfully to track them down, he told his wife, even visiting the home of the mother’s relatives several years later. They asked why he was still coming around. The baby wasn’t his, he recalls them saying. Still, he told his wife, in the back of his mind he’d often wondered about the little boy named Joey.

Last night, he’d gotten a message from him.

“I was over the moon.”

Lee Kirby studied the expression of stunned elation on her husband’s face. She wasn’t angry at the delayed revelation, she said, because she could see it hadn’t been in the forefront of his mind in recent years. More than anything, she felt overjoyed for him — yet another example of a blessing entering his life since he got sober.

*“Good morning!”* Parker wrote back. *“Do you go by Joseph, Joe, or Joey? You were Joey as a baby.”*

Back in California, Arriaga’s wife saw he’d received a Facebook message and shook him out of bed.

“He knows about you!” she told him.

Stunned, Arriaga read the message, quickly responding to several of Parker’s questions. *Where do you live? (My wife and I live in Southern California, Arriaga answered.) Is that your little girl in your picture? (That is my daughter! She’s 5 now, and has a 3-year-old brother and 1-year-old sister.)*

Then, he sent another, shorter message:

*“This was a lot to wake up to. You knew about me? Enough to know I went by Joey?”*

In conversations over email, phone calls and two visits since then, Bobby and Joey, as they call each other, began to build a relationship.



Joseph Arriaga and Bobby Parker found they had many things in common, from looks to a shared love of reading.  
(Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

They've learned that their left eyes squint in the same way when they smile and that they're both voracious readers. Parker, who now has a job in human resources, worked as a librarian for years; Arriaga, who has a bachelor's in English and is now studying to get a teaching credential, read 42 books last year. In the past, they learned, they had both used substances to numb pain.

Bit by bit, they told each other about their lives.



Joseph Arriaga as a young boy  
(Joseph Arriaga)

Arriaga grew up with a brother and sister, he explained, and spent his boyhood in Monterey and later Temecula — an easy early life, he said, filled with lots of reading and video games.

Parker told Arriaga that he met his mother in 1991, while they were students at the University of South Alabama. They dated for a while and she got pregnant, initially telling him the baby wasn't his, Parker recalled. In the summer of 1992, soon after Parker's father died, he said, Arriaga's mother visited with a newborn baby — Joseph — and she said the baby was his. They kept in touch, exchanging letters when she moved to Florida.

“I was ecstatic,” he recalled. “I had this feeling of, ‘Wow I’m losing my father, but I gained a child.’”

He offered to marry her, Parker said, and although that didn't happen, they continued to write and visited a few times. In May of 1993, Parker received a note — which he still has — saying she and Joey were moving to California.

Then the letters stopped.

Of everything Arriaga learned during his first in-person meeting with Parker, it was the old letters Parker still had from Arriaga's mother that floored him.

Arriaga immediately recognized his mother's looping handwriting, but the content was impossible to reconcile with the origin story he had been told.

When he was around 8, not long after his cousin let slip he wasn't really part of the family, Arriaga confronted the man who had married his mother and raised Arriaga from infancy, the man he had believed was his father and refers to as Dad to this day. "You're not even my real dad," Arriaga recalls saying.

His mother then pulled him aside, Arriaga said, and told him that he'd been conceived by rape, a concept he didn't fully understand until a few years later.

But the more he understood, the more the story weighed him down. He felt associated with something evil and began to avoid looking at himself in the mirror. When he excelled in martial arts, it felt like a double-edged sword — "I'm biologically predisposed to violence," he worried.

As a preteen, when he worked up the nerve to ask his mother if she'd gotten a good look at the man who'd attacked her, he recalls her saying that she had not. When he wrote to her asking more questions about his origin story years later, he said, his mother emailed back, saying that she'd been attacked on the night of a memorable baseball game by a friend of a friend of her cousin. When she'd later asked her cousin who the man was, he told her he didn't know.

She remembered nothing about the man but his eyes, she wrote, which looked nothing like Joseph's.

But now, Parker was telling him the two had dated and seen each other even after Joey's birth — and he had letters to confirm that.



From what he read in them, not only had she stayed in touch with Parker, she had sent him pictures of Joey, including a photo he had grown up seeing in a frame at home. She wrote letters about her life, signing them “love,” and described Joey as taking “after his father.” She said she missed Parker and wanted to get together “kind of like a family.”

How did any of this fit together with the conception story his mother had told him?

Arriaga’s story is not unique, said Anita Foeman, a professor of communication and media at West Chester University, who has written extensively about at-home DNA testing. And separating fact from fiction can often be difficult.

She has heard of many situations where what people learn from their DNA results turns out to be quite different from what they were told as children, including some with striking similarities to Arriaga’s, she said. And parents sometimes stick to their stories even when confronted with evidence. Many people still have secrets from a different era — a time when women were more fiercely shamed for having children out of wedlock — but they’re now running up against a once-unforeseeable reality: Anyone with \$99 can get their DNA tested.

“Secrets that people used to just categorically keep, you can’t keep anymore,” said Foeman, who coauthored “Who Am I: Identity in the Age of Consumer DNA Testing.”

Arriaga says that when he first mentioned the name Robert Parker in a phone call to his mother, she reacted as if she didn’t recognize the name. He later sent her an email, including pictures of the old letters, saying he knew what it was like to tell a small lie and watch it spiral out of control. He understood, but he needed the full truth and until then, he couldn’t talk to her.

There’s been no movement in that direction so far, and they haven’t been in contact in recent months, Arriaga said, but he loves his mother deeply and hopes to eventually be back in touch with her.

She did not respond to telephone, email or mail requests for an interview for this story.

Parker told Arriaga he had no way of reaching Arriaga's mother after she left for California. He didn't have a phone number for her, and internet searching was in its infancy. When he searched her maiden name online in the years to come, he always hit dead ends. His siblings and mother had known about Joey as a baby, and when Parker got married in 1994, he told his now ex-wife about him, hopeful that he and his son would eventually reunite.

But he didn't tell his children, his daughter, now 31, nor the two boys, now teenagers. He also didn't tell his current wife, whom he married in 2016, or her daughter, Parker's stepdaughter. By that point, he said, it felt impossible they'd ever reunite. In more recent years, as DNA testing grew more available, Parker didn't give much thought to submitting a sample of his saliva.

If Joey was, indeed, his son, he was now an adult, and if he hadn't contacted him, Parker resolved that he wouldn't be the one to disrupt the status quo.

"I just assumed he didn't want to find me."

Arriaga met his mentor, Tae Sung, while getting his degree in English from California Baptist University, where Sung teaches literature and runs the university's Writing Center. Blown away by the clarity and persuasiveness of Arriaga's writing, Sung recruited him to tutor other students.

When he had downtime, Arriaga often swung by Sung's class to chat. Their conversations sometimes looped back to James' pragmatist philosophy, and Sung shared his view that, although we can't change the facts of our past, we can change the meaning we ascribe to them.

"So many people want to bury their story," Sung said. "We need to do the opposite. We need to add to it — so it takes the sting away."

Arriaga was raised Catholic but abandoned his faith at 16 and eventually got into drugs as his identity crisis deepened. He thought of himself as a mistake — human trash, he recalled — and dropped out of community college after a semester and a half before moving in with friends in Riverside. Then, he brokered a deal with God: "I need you to get me a job, then we'll talk." The next day, he landed a gig at Carl's Jr.



A few weeks later, he met his future wife, Anne, who invited him to church. Over time, he said, small things started to click, and he returned to faith.

He and Anne married when he was 21, and four months later found out she was pregnant with their first daughter. Arriaga went back to school, earning straight A's and got a job at Ralphs, where he still works full time as a supervisor in the dairy department, often using his breaks to catch up on reading for his teaching program. (He plans eventually to teach high school English.)

During his senior year as an undergraduate, Arriaga took a Christian ethics class, and when the topic of abortion in cases of rape came up, all the emotions of his childhood raced back. Soon after, early in 2020, he confided to Sung.

"I've never told you this, but ..." he said, almost immediately breaking into sobs.

Sung watched Arriaga's body tense up as he spoke.

"It was clear to me that he hadn't fully worked out the meaning of that story," Sung recalled thinking. Were there avenues he hadn't yet explored? he asked. Questions that remained unanswered?

A single thought popped into Arriaga's mind: "I need to find out what he looks like."

He mailed in his DNA a few months later and eventually learned he had a close relative, likely an uncle, named Sandford Parker.

Arriaga had to go to work, but Anne, whose unyielding support and internet sleuthing he credits with the eventual reunion, narrowed in on the right Sandford Parker — the unusual spelling with two Ds helped — and then clicked on his Facebook friend, Bobby, whose profile pictures show him smiling in front of bookshelves.

"The first thing we found out is he's a librarian," Arriaga said, laughing. "I was like, 'You must be kidding me.'"

Since September, the two have emailed back and forth and set up standing Monday-night phone calls. In December, Arriaga flew to Florida for a short visit. Parker and his two teenage sons picked him up at the airport, and Arriaga remembers doing a

double-take when he heard his half-brother Robby's voice. It sounded just like his own.

Two months earlier, Robby, now 19, recalls his father sitting him and his younger brother down for a talk — the same one he'd just had with Lee Kirby.

“When he told me, it was...” Robby said, trailing off and taking a deep breath. “It was a shock, definitely.”

Now, Robby said, he views the situation as a happy surprise and understands the reasoning behind his father's long silence.

When the brothers met in December, they bonded over reading — Robby works at a bookstore — and Halo, a favorite video game. When Arriaga stood in between Robby and their father, the resemblance was uncanny.

“It looks like an evolution chain almost,” Robby said. “He looks like the missing link between us.”

Throughout the trip, Arriaga and Parker picked up on conversations they'd started over email and on the phone. Parker sometimes thought about the violent origin story that Arriaga had grown up believing — a story that bothers him deeply, Parker said, and infuriates him when he thinks about the psychological toll it took on Arriaga.

Two weeks after getting his second Pfizer shot, Parker flew to California to meet Arriaga's wife and children, who call him Grandpa Bobo.

They went to lunch at Red Robin and stopped at Barnes and Noble, where Parker bought Arriaga a copy of “Soul of an Octopus,” which explores the creatures' intelligence and complexity.

A couple of days later, standing in the kitchen of an Airbnb they shared for the visit, Arriaga talked about how much he loved going to the aquarium in Monterey growing up. Parker smiled, saying he'd often visited a marine research station in Biloxi as a boy.



Both Arriaga and Parker had used substances to numb pain in the past, but their meeting came after they had each moved past that. The timing felt predestined, they said.  
(Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

They'd stayed up late most nights, talking for hours, and Arriaga noticed Parker eyeing the Keurig coffee machine.

“Do it!”

“You think I should?”

Arriaga smiled mischievously.

Parker smirked back, popping a K-cup into the machine. As he poured a bit of Hazelnut creamer into his cup, Arriaga, who drinks his coffee black, feigned an expression of disgust, joking that he'd been stunned the first time he saw him use creamer.

“I wondered if Ancestry made a mistake.”

Both men agree that the timing of their meeting felt predestined.

Arriaga is grateful it happened now, during a happier, more settled phase of his life, and Parker feels the same way — he’s active in the recovery community, after getting sober two and a half years ago.

For years, even as his mental health declined and his first marriage started to fall apart, Parker drank daily. He binged on beer or Jack Daniel’s and sometimes tried to stop, but couldn’t. If he’d reunited with Arriaga back then, he said, he knows he would’ve been happy, but also a deeply overwhelmed, lousy role model.

“I would’ve been a mess.”

Reconnecting, Parker said, was the bright spot of a dark pandemic year punctuated by stresses about the virus and about money after Kirby was furloughed from her job at a food distribution company last summer.

For Arriaga, discovering the fuller reality of his origin story offered deep relief.

“It was like a chapter closed,” he said. “I’m not a taboo anymore.”

Maybe eventually he’ll write a memoir, he says, weaving together three influences that have helped define his life — the man who raised him, Parker, and his “ghost father,” the story that once shaped him.

He’s already picked a title: *My Fathers’ Son*.