

Ori Arazi

Erez Maor – Outsider

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*In memory of my dear parents, Anna and Aryeh Arazi, who
gave me their name and all their love, to my wife Metzada and
my children, Noy and Yaheli Aryeh*



As for people like us, our fate is to be present in the world as orphans, sentenced to chase our parents' shadows that have vanished. We try to fulfill our mission, to the best of our ability, because until we have accomplished this, we shall have no rest.

Kazuo Ishiguru, *When We Were Orphans*

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Outsider

I was seven or eight years old when I understood that I had been adopted. I didn't have to be a professor of quantum theory in order to understand this simple equation. Anyone who knew me knew it was as clear as black writing on a white wall.

My parents were light-skinned Ashkenazi Jews and I was dark-skinned with an obvious Middle Eastern appearance. Furthermore, my parents were nearly 50 years old when I was born and at that time, in the early 1960s, there were no advanced fertility treatments and if my mother had been pregnant, it would have been a real miracle.

My school friends and kids from the neighborhood often asked me if I was adopted. I never knew what to answer, but I sensed that if it was something everyone was asking, apparently it was true. Nevertheless, I never asked my parents if I had been adopted. I didn't want to make them sad and as far as I was concerned, they were my parents in every sense.

I spent hours leafing through old family albums, forcing myself to find a resemblance between my parents and myself in black-and-white childhood photos that were taken in

foreign lands, and in which they were impeccably dressed and seriously posed. It was no use. In spite of the effort I made looking at the photos from different angles, I couldn't find even a hint of resemblance.

I sadly internalized the strange fact that I was not their biological son. More than once I was embarrassed by the age and physical differences between us, but mostly, I was ashamed of the dark face that was reflected back at me each time I looked in the mirror. I considered myself an Ashkenazi Jew and I felt that there was a foreign and unfamiliar boy living inside me and looking back at me.

This dark-skinned boy was me. I repeated this sadly to myself, trying to get used to it. The words from the old song in the movie *Kuni Lemel* ("The Flying Matchmaker")¹ did a good job of describing how I felt: "They say I'm not me, and I'm alarmed by that, because if I'm not me, then who the heck am I?"

Who am I? That was the question that always bothered me, like the buzzing of a bothersome fly that can't be shooed away.

I suppose that if I hadn't been so different in appearance from my parents, my life would have been easier. Perhaps I would have fit in with my surroundings, but I felt dark and unclean, like "Black Sambo," as my friends sometimes called me when they were angry and wanted to hurt me. My dark

1 *Kuni Lemel* was the name of the lead character in an Israeli film based on a Yiddish play.

skin color was a stigma that constantly reminded me and the rest of the world that I wasn't my parents' biological son, but a waif whose origins were inferior. It was as if I wore a sign with big letters saying: "I am adopted."

Oh, what I wouldn't have given for a magic potion to lighten my skin.

From a rather young age, it was clear that my birth mother had not wanted me and I was stung by the insult, which left an unhealed scar that always reminded me I was an unwanted baby. Thus, a black hole of rage, feelings of inferiority, shame and unsolved mystery opened up and sucked me in, leaving me no peace. Because of the great physical difference between my parents and me, my adoption could be considered interracial with all the problems involved. I lacked the ability to blend into my surroundings and this unfortunate fact caused me frustration and embarrassment.

There were a few Sephardic Jews in my class and neighborhood, but none of them were as dark as I. I felt like an ugly duckling among beautiful white swans, inferior and miserable. Only when I walked a distance to the Yemenite neighborhood did I feel that I belonged, like an Indian who returns to the reservation.

My parents protected me and enfolded me with love, but at the same time they weighed me down with the heavy baggage of hopes and expectations. They aspired for me to be a good student who one day would be a doctor or lawyer like my father. However, in spite of the battery of private teachers they provided, I was the worst student at school.

Thus, in addition to looking different, I went around with the feeling that I was a disappointment to my parents. A failure. A nothing. Small and miserable.

Both my parents were academics. My father was a successful lawyer. He was tall and heavy and bore a striking resemblance to French President De Gaulle. My mother was a small woman, well groomed and attractive, a microbiologist by profession. And there I was in the middle—collapsing under the weight of the heavy expectations placed on my thin shoulders; expectations that I could not fulfill.

I felt stupid, dull, and unworthy of being their son. Over the years, because of an article I read in the newspaper, I was tested for learning disabilities and several difficulties were discovered. That was a relief. Finally, I had proof in writing that I wasn't just stupid...but as a child, I attributed my failures to my unknown genes. My self-confidence was down in the dumps, whereas my feelings of inferiority blossomed and grew to gigantic proportions.

I was like an odd, defective, different, outsider and foreigner in exile who lived in a world of his own.

My thoughts raced with questions regarding the woman who had given birth to me. Where was she? Was she sorry that she had abandoned me? Did she have other children? Did they know about me? Was she a young girl who had strayed or a prostitute who had made me with some random client? Even then, I wondered whether she had talked about my existence with someone else, or whether she had hidden my existence in the depths of her memory as a shameful secret.

As a child, I repeatedly searched for myself in the faces of unfamiliar women on the bus or in the street, and amused myself with the thought that perhaps the woman sitting opposite me, who resembled me a bit, was my birth mother. This thought excited and saddened me at the same time; a child's sad games of the imagination.

In third grade, because of discipline problems and bad grades, the school guidance counselor recommended that my mother arrange a meeting with a psychologist who would perhaps find a way to help. My parents found a psychologist with an impeccable reputation and several days later we arrived at his clinic. He was a young man who was more like a physical education teacher—not like an adult with a pipe and Viennese accent.

His approach was simple and primitive. His educated opinion was that my parents were too gentle with me. He explained to them that they had to be strict and use corporal punishment. Essentially, this psychotic individual recommended that they beat me. My parents were surprised. They thought that they were going to meet Dr. Freud and instead, they got Dr. Frankenstein.

To demonstrate his advanced method, the psychologist told my father to order me to remove my shoes. My father was embarrassed but asked me gently to take off my shoes and I, of course, refused. I'm no lab rabbit or trained puppy, I thought, and I felt that there was no need to humiliate myself.

Dr. Frankenstein was precisely aiming for that. He took my right hand and began to twist it forcefully. “Take off your shoes!” he commanded me. The pain was insufferable and I bent down and began to untie the laces of my left shoe. The psychologist looked at my parents as the proud victor. He loosened his grasp for a moment and I quickly released myself, pushed him away and escaped. I ran home. An hour later, my parents arrived at home too. We didn’t speak about what had happened and I never saw Dr. Frankenstein again.

Nevertheless, my parents adopted one of his bits of advice. If I came home later than the set time, they wouldn’t open the door for me. The first time this happened and I found the door locked, I knocked and rang the bell for a whole hour until I understood that I would be spending the night outside. I went down to the damp shelter, lay down on an old sofa there and tried to fall asleep, but without success. Three hours later, I went back upstairs and checked the door. This time it was open...I knew that my father had opened it. His gentle heart wouldn’t allow him to leave me outside the entire night.

Another summer night, I came home late and the door was again locked. I went up to the roof and settled down on top of the laundry room, enjoying the breeze from the sea. I smoked cigarettes that I had stolen from my mother’s purse and happily noticed an unexpected gift—I saw Netta, who was the prettiest girl in the neighborhood. She lived in a roof apartment opposite our building and had an Air Force pilot as a boyfriend. I saw her draped in a towel as she came out

of the shower. She sat on a chair at her make-up table and combed her long hair. Then, when lifting the arm holding her brush, the towel around her fell to the floor and I saw her perfect, wet body, brown from long hours spent at the Gordon swimming pool.

Being adopted and an only child had certain advantages. I was the only child in the neighborhood who was allowed to have a dog. I had a big, hairy German shepherd, who became my constant companion. He was like the brother I never had. We went everywhere together and he slept in my bed with me. When I spoke to him, I was convinced that he understood every word.

The neighborhood was my kingdom. I loved to roam its yards, shelters and rooftops and find treasures such as old bicycles, mildewed encyclopedias or anything else that struck my fancy and that I then took into my possession.

On one winter afternoon after school, Handsome Danny and I went up to a rooftop on Netzach Yisrael Street. In a corner of the roof we saw a package wrapped in rags and upon opening it, we discovered a real treasure—2,000 dollars, 1,000 marks and a gold ingot with the Bank of England inscribed on it. We took the booty back to my house and told my father. He called the police and he was told that if no one came looking for what we had discovered we could keep the money.

In the meantime, an article was published about us in the newspaper and we became local heroes. I was happy. Not

because of the financial worth of what we had found that I didn't completely understand, but because I had found a treasure, just like I had always dreamed of finding—just like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, my childhood heroes.

Several months later we went to court to obtain the money and to our surprise, we had become the accused. A representative from the police claimed that we were trespassers and that the money we found had been stolen from the Israel Police National Headquarters in the famous robbery of its safes, which had made them into a laughing stock. Ultimately, we lost the trial and didn't receive a cent, but I still remember the weight of the gold ingot in my hand and how it sparkled in the winter sun.

At home, I was completely different from the wild child I was in the neighborhood, as if I had a split personality. Being an only child, without siblings or cousins, I was solitary and my solitude led me to books with plots that drew me into other worlds and gave me comfort. In other words, I was a real bookworm. Other children had brothers and sisters and I had books and the fabulous worlds they opened before me.

I especially loved adventure stories, such as *Michael Strogoff*, *Treasure Island*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Chasamba* (the absolutely absolute secret group), *Ringo*, *Patrick Kim*, and later on I read books by Harold Robbins. From there I went on to Raymond Chandler, Ernest Hemingway (mainly short stories), Ian Fleming and John Le Carré.

More than once, in rare moments of grace, I made a connection between adopted literary figures and myself and it made me feel special. It was adopted Oedipus, Remus and Romulus, and of course, Moses and me. Moses had been sentenced to death by Pharaoh's decree that every son born be cast into the Nile, but then grew up in Pharaoh's palace as the adopted son of Batya, Pharaoh's daughter. In that way, I felt a connection to Edgar Allan Poe (who was also adopted) and to literary heroes such as Tom Sawyer, who was raised by his Aunt Polly, and Oliver Twist.

I loved *Tarzan, King of the Apes* more than all the rest. Tarzan was my undisputed idol. I read the books and comic books repeatedly and I saw the Johnny Weissmuller films again and again. On my visits to the Gordon swimming pool, I fought in the cold waters against imaginary pools of crocodiles, and I built a wood hut in our yard. In contrast to me (an inferior and unknown boy who was adopted by parents of Ashkenazi nobility) Tarzan was the son of nobility who had been adopted by an ape. That was such a consolation for me; even Tarzan was torn between two different identities, even if they were the opposite of mine. My identification with noble Lord Greystoke was absolute and years later, when Johnny Weissmuller died, I felt as if I had lost a close relative.

When I was fourteen-years old, and my interest in the opposite sex had grown, I entered the disco era. *Saturday Night Fever*, starring John Travolta, was in the movie theaters. We snuck into the theater nearly every evening. It was Handsome Danny, Moshe, the butcher's son (who always ensured a steady

meat supply for our campfires), the school genius, Shaki, Duek (whose parents had become rich and had moved from Jaffa to live in the neighborhood) and me. We bought one ticket at the box office. One of us would enter and under the cover of darkness, he would open the door for the rest of us from within. Thus, we saw a film dozens of times. We were enchanted by Travolta's charismatic, yet vulnerable, figure. When he lit a cigarette, we lit up with him, from the red Marlboro package just like his.

On Friday nights, parties with DJs were held in the high school sports halls in town. We waited for the party all week, so that we could display our dancing talents and our hairstyles, which had been created at Orly's Hair Salon. We danced to the Bee Gees, precisely imitating Travolta, the King of Disco.

At the last party before summer vacation, I finally had a chance to do something with a girl. My parents had gone away for the weekend and the apartment was mine. Danny told me that he had met an American tourist at the beach and asked if he could bring her over to my place. Of course, I answered in the affirmative. After the party, I went home and Danny went to the Frishman Beach to meet the tourist, who had been sleeping there in a sleeping bag.

They arrived an hour later. She was a bit plump and simple—not the glamorous American tourist I had imagined. We sat for a bit in the living room and then Danny and American Debby left for my parents' bedroom. I waited until the light went off and then quietly moved to the bathroom porch, from where I could peek through the shutters separating

the rooms. I saw Debby undo her bra. She had nice breasts, tanned by Israel's sun. Danny stroked them and they talked quietly. Then, after a brief discussion, he stood over her, speaking in an angry tone.

I quickly moved back to the living room and lit a cigarette. "She didn't let me," Danny said in frustration. "You try."

I entered the bedroom. She sat on the bed, leaning back against the wall. "Can I join you?" I asked.

"Okay," she answered with an American accent.

I sat next to her, embarrassed and not knowing how to continue.

"Do you want some hash?" she asked.

"Why not?" I answered with false confidence, as if I was used to smoking hashish every day.

Debby took a cigarette and removed the tobacco from it onto a newspaper and then took a brown lump from her backpack, lit a match and heated it up. When the lump softened, she crumbled it and mixed the hashish with the tobacco. She put the mixture into the empty cigarette paper and tore off the filter with her teeth. In its place, she tore off a piece of cardboard from the matchbox, rolled it and shaped it into a new filter. She now lit the joint, inhaled deeply into her lungs a few times and said, "Smoke," as she handed me the cigarette.

I took a few puffs and thought to myself, "That's it?"

I didn't feel a thing, but a few moments later it began to affect me. I felt a pleasant heaviness and laughed at every bit

of nonsense. Debby's hand stroked me, she undressed me and pulled me to her. Her mouth against mine with our tongues intertwined. She directed me inside her. I moved above her with rhythmic motions and when her breathing turned to moans, I came; happy mostly because I had finally gotten rid of my bothersome virginity.

During that time, I discovered new friends at Kikar Dizengoff (Dizengoff Square). They were all school dropouts like me. The steps of the kikar were our meeting place. There were kids from the north and south of the city, from the Hatikvah neighborhood and from Kfar Shalem, from the Yemenite Quarter and from Ramat Aviv. Kikar Dizengoff was a true Israeli melting pot—Ben Gurion would have been proud of us. We dressed in a slovenly manner with worn jeans and athletic shoes or cowboy boots. We all had long hair and earrings.

In the winter, we hung out in the game arcades around the kikar and in the summer we hung out at Frishman Beach. After the beach, we went to parties. We snuck into the "Ir Hano'ar" (Youth City) and every night at midnight, we went to the Paris Movie Theater to watch the *Rocky Horror Show* for the millionth time. We sang all the songs and talked back to the film's heroes at all the right places. After the movie, we went down to the beach, running naked in the water and making merry.

When we got tired, we joined homeless Avram's campfire, which took place at Frishman Beach. Avram, with his bent back, muscles and deep brown skin, had the appearance of a