

An Accidental Man of the House of Israel

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It wasn't ever a secret. I always knew. And even if they hadn't been completely open about it, how could I possibly not have known? My dad is six-foot-three and has a thirty-two-inch waist. My mother is five-foot-eleven. Both have jet black hair. My dad needs to shave a second time if they're going out for dinner. I, on the other hand, grew up looking like a baby Viking. I'm short, blond, stocky of build, blue of eye, round of belly. I do not look like either of my brothers, both of whom are tall and thin, and shave daily. I shave, maybe, every third day. And if I don't, my eventual beard is reddish-orange. Theirs, like Dad's, is jet black.

The whole "adopted" thing wasn't ever a real issue. When I was very young, I'm not sure I even understood what it meant precisely and, if anything, it made me feel special to know that I had been chosen—in a way that my brothers were not—to be my parents' child. Nor did it seem strange that our family had one adopted and two non-adopted children in it—it was years before I understood that we were the living example of that classic story in which a couple try forever to have a baby, then make peace with their lack of success and adopt a child, only then to proceed almost instantly to produce their own children as though there hadn't ever been a problem in the first place. Like most children, I suppose, I accepted my family as I found it, took it for granted that we existed on the terms on which we actually did exist, and did not devote time or energy to the pointless contemplation of how we might have existed in some alternate universe in which we weren't configured as I knew our family to be.

I was thirteen when the concept of having "birth parents" came into my life and I can remember the specific context in which I acquired that added insight into things. I was in summer camp. The boys in our bunk had been together since we all began

sleepaway camp together when we were nine, so this was our fourth summer together. (Unlike some of the other bunks, we had neither suffered attrition nor experienced accretion in the course of our years at camp and so were exactly the same nine Jewish boys that camp had brought together in our first year.) By thirteen, we were all immediately pre- or post-pubescent. And it was in the context of our endless yakking about the various aspects of what we referenced, refined young gentlemen that we were, as “doing it,” that it first struck me that if my parents chose me from among the available children of the world to be their oldest son but themselves did not actually actuate my existence with some version of the activity under endless discussion in our bunk, then some *other* couple must have actually produced me in the way that my bunkmates were so intent on puzzling out in all of its forbidden detail.

For the rest of the camp season, the notion of “birth” parents just buried itself down deep in my psyche and stayed there without prompting me to explore (or even to identify) its various corollaries, let alone to ponder the specific way any of them might somehow impact on my sense of self. But when my parents came to camp to get me at the end of August, I surprised myself—and, I’m sure, them—by not even waiting for us to get halfway home before bringing up the topic.

“Can I ask an important question?” I was alone in the backseat, happy to be able to have this conversation without having to look directly at my parents. My brothers went to a different camp, one devoted almost exclusively to sports and which went on for a few more days. If I was going to open this up for discussion, this was clearly the right moment.

“Of course,” Dad answered instantly. He was a big believer in Important Questions, and often labelled his to me in that precise way so that I knew to pay attention.

“Before you were my parents, who were my...you know, my *other* parents?”

“Your *other* parents?” My mother turned to look back at me as though I had suddenly started speaking in some foreign language she couldn’t account for me knowing. “You don’t have any other parents. We are your parents.” She sounded certain.

“I meant my first parents, the ones who gave me to you.” I knew I was skating on thin ice here, but I couldn’t really think of not pursuing this now that I had started.

I’m not sure what answer I expected, but when my father spoke—and without turning around at all as he drove—it was quietly and calmly. “No one gave anybody to anyone. You were put up for adoption. We wanted to adopt a child. We met you and decided on the spot that you were the boy meant for us, so we took you home and that was that.”

I was sure there was some detail I was missing, but I lacked the vocabulary to ask my question clearly. “But, you know,” I mumbled, “the people...you know, the *other* people....” My voice became slightly choked as I tried to formulate my thoughts without referencing the concept of *doing it*. “...the man and the woman who, you know....” I was dying to finish my sentence, but I couldn’t quite find the words. “...who, you know...you know, who...you know, the man and the woman....” I gave up. I had no real idea what I was talking about. I was sure I sounded like a total idiot, but I was still hoping my parents would rescue me by asking the question for me and then answering it as though I had asked it myself. And then, suddenly, I had a flash of unanticipated insight. “The people who gave birth to me,” I said semi-triumphantly. “Those people, who were they?”

My mother turned in her seat to face me. “We don’t know,” she said. “Whoever they were, they weren’t able to raise a child. So they arranged with an adoption agency to place their child with a family that could. That’s the whole story. We had registered with that agency, so they called us to see if we were still interested, which we most certainly were. But who your birth parents were, there’s no way to know that now. They were probably just children themselves....”

My mom’s voice trailed off as this new thought—that children could have children—insinuated itself uncomfortably in my marginally pubescent consciousness. But when I spoke, it was with conviction born mostly of ill ease. “Well, then, I guess they’re happy that their kid ended up with such great parents,” I said despite the fact that my mother had just said that they didn’t know my parents at all, those probable children who produced me.

But my mother seemed not to notice the contradiction, so eager was she to agree. “I’m sure they were thrilled,” she said.

And that, more or less, was my introduction to the concept of my conception, my fledgling inquiry stalled in its earliest stages by my parents’ conviction that my birth parents’ interest in me was terminated shortly after my birth when they, my birth mother and father, gave me away to the kind of agency that places parentless children with childless would-be parents. It would be years before it struck me as odd to use the phrase “parentless children” to describe children who had, not none of either, but two of each.



The whole issue lay dormant for a very long time. I finished high school and went on to Duke, where I earned a B.A. in American history, and then surprised everybody (including myself) by taking the LSAT and doing well enough to get into Yale. And it was there, in the middle of my first year, that this issue bubbled up unexpectedly and, although I couldn’t have known it yet, turned into a challenge of the specific kind I couldn’t possibly have anticipated.

It all began innocently enough with a letter that showed up in my mailbox one day. This was 2010. Anything important was sent by email, so my mailbox—the one in the front lobby of my New Haven apartment house—was generally crammed with advertising flyers and take-out menus. I didn’t even bother emptying it every single day. But on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, I did...and there, amidst all the takeout flyers, was a letter addressed to me personally from an agency of some sort that I was sure I had never heard of.

The name was unfamiliar, but the envelope had a semi-official feel to it so I opened it. My birth parents, I read, wished to hear from me. But, because of the specific laws that pertained in Wyoming—which I now learned to my amazement was the state in which I had formally been adopted—because the laws of Wyoming only allowed adoption agencies to notify adopted children that their birth parents wish to hear from them and then to do nothing else at all without that child’s permission, the ball was entirely in my court. Nor, oddly enough, could such adopted children actually *be*

children—adopted individuals had to be over eighteen even to learn of their birth parents' interest in meeting them and only then could they either respond or not respond. I could therefore make the whole issue go away either by not responding at all or by responding in the negative. And, besides, I told myself, who were these people to me? Probably some goofy teenagers possessed of no clear idea about contraception who got pregnant and then solved their problem by putting their child up for adoption. Had abortion been an option? I actually went online to check and learned that there were three facilities providing abortions in Wyoming in 1987, the year of my birth. So they could have terminated the pregnancy! I am pretty liberal about abortion, but it suddenly felt personal in a way it hadn't previously as I realized that my whole existence was predicated on some unknown woman's decision not to solve her problem in that particular way.

But none of that musing spoke to the actual question at hand. Did I want to meet these people? Related to that question, but also distinct from it, was its corollary: did I want to have these people in my life? Would it be possible, I wondered, to meet them, learn a bit about the circumstances of my conception, and then go back to having nothing to do with them? That, I thought, would be ideal. They'd tell me whether I had been conceived in the back seat of a Chevy or a Pontiac. I'd tell them I was fine, that I was raised by decent, loving parents who sacrificed so that I could go to camp, have piano lessons, go to Duke and then to Yale. They'd be happy I was well. I'd be happy they were well. We'd all be happy! And then we'd go back to having nothing to do with each other, possibly after exchanging photographs of each other that they would cherish and put in a silver frame on their piano, and that I myself wouldn't quite know what to do with. Such as it was, that was my plan! And so, without giving it much more thought than that, I filled out the form (which involved merely checking a box, signing my name, and adding the date) and sent it back in the pre-paid envelope included with the form.

In retrospect, I should have told my parents. In another age, they would have had to be part of the story already...but the agency had simply found me on Facebook and written to me in care of Yale, where someone in the Law School office had forwarded the letter to my address. And so, having jumped off a cliff without giving much

thought to what happens to most people who jump off cliffs, I dropped the envelope in a mailbox on my way to class the following morning.



It was the day before Thanksgiving when I mailed that envelope. I went home for the holiday, had a very nice time with my parents and brothers, and with my brothers' girlfriends and some friends from *shul* that my parents invited to the house for the holiday. I slept in my old room, wore my high school pajamas, avoided reading anything to do with schoolwork, and basically just vegged out for a few days without doing much other than eating. And we ate a lot! My mom had a whole different crowd for Friday night—two of her girlfriends and their husbands, plus some of my brothers' friends in town for the holiday weekend and one of our recently widowed neighbors. So that was fun—more eating, more drinking, more staying up late. I actually went to *shul* with my Dad on Saturday morning, partially because he asked me to and partially because I myself was curious to meet the new rabbi and to greet all the people I knew would be there and who had been part of the cast of characters that formed the backdrop to my mostly happy adolescence.

I drove back to New Haven Sunday night. The next day I was back in class. Things felt totally normal. But the following Friday, just ten days after sending the form back, I opened my mailbox and had yet another letter from the Albany County Family Services Center in Laramie.

I took it home and, finally taking the matter seriously, I made a pot of coffee, poured myself a cup, then sat down at the kitchen table to open the envelope.

Inside was a piece of legal-sized ruled yellow paper clearly torn off a pad. And on it was written a message for me: "We would like to meet you," the note said. "But we don't want to disrupt your life or upset you. If you would like to talk to us, please call us at the number below." That was the whole message. At the bottom of the page were two names, Bill and Betty, each followed by a telephone numbers. For some reason, I liked the fact that they hadn't given their last name. Again, the ball had landed in my court.

I waited a few days, then called Bill's number. He answered on the first ring.

"This is Sam Kaufman," I said.

"Who?"

"You wrote to me," I stammered, having assumed he would just somehow know who I was.

"Is this a sales call?" He sounded like he meant it, which was funny since I would probably have said the exact same thing had the shoe been on the other foot.

"No," I said, "this is not a sales call. The Albany County Family Services Center forwarded your letter to me and I'm calling you because you asked me to." I could feel the emotion rising in my voice. "This is probably a mistake," I said quickly and hung up.

I had no idea what to do. Should I call back? Would he know who I was this time? I had given him my name and he now had my phone number as well—so I could have just waited to see if he called me back. I felt like I had opened a door and then shut it in someone's face for no obvious reason. All I had had to do was to do nothing at all if I didn't want to speak to this man. So, really, this was all my fault. I filled out the form. I made the call. I told him my name. Why was I being such a huge baby about this? I redialed.

He picked up on the first ring. He apologized, although he surely didn't have any reason to. I also apologized, mumbling something about cold feet. And then we began to talk.

He and Betty were in high school when she got pregnant. She wouldn't consider an abortion. She gave birth, gave up the baby, and was back in twelfth grade less than ten days later. They didn't tell any untruths to anyone; everybody knew she had gotten pregnant unintentionally and given up her baby for adoption. It was all anyone talked about for a week or two. And then some new scandal broke, and Betty and her baby turned into old news. Eventually, everybody moved on.

Bill and Betty married when they were both in college and went on to have two sons, Albert and Arnold, currently in tenth and twelfth grades at Whiting High School in Laramie and both of them, apparently, related to me in precisely the same way as to each other. Albert had red hair like his father; Arnold had blond hair like their mother. I apparently had a full second family...or, rather, a first one that weirdly mirrored my second one, complete with two parents and two brothers. Where this was all going, I had no idea.

I told him a bit about my life. The whole Jewish thing seemed to land with a thud, but I couldn't think of what to say when he said that he hadn't ever considered that I might not be a Christian and so just moved the conversation along in a different direction.

He stopped short of inviting me to Wyoming, saying he needed to tell his wife about our call. I didn't ask if he was going to share the details of our conversation with his other sons and he didn't say. To say the truth, I was relieved—there was a lot of information for me to process as well, plus I needed to decide to what extent I wanted to involve my parents—my real parents—in any of this, or whether I wanted to involve them at all.

We hung up without making specific plans to be in touch again. But I think we both knew that neither of us was done with the other.



The weirdness started within a few weeks.

First, Arnold, the twelfth-grader, called. He sounded friendly enough on the phone, although he insisted on calling me Samuel even after I made it clear that I am only really ever called Sam. He asked me if I ever went to church, an odd question that meant either that his—our—father hadn't told him about the Jewish thing...or, more ominously, that he had. I told him, no, I didn't go to church. I went to synagogue.

“Synagogue,” he repeated, stumbling over the word slightly as though he had never said it out loud before.

“Yes,” I said. “Like Jesus,” I added, I thought helpfully.

“Jesus?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “Wasn’t Jesus a Jew? So where would he have *davened* if not in a *shul*?” I was almost enjoying this, but somehow without understanding how offended young Arnold was becoming with each successive misstep.

“Jesus of Nazareth was the son of God,” Arnold replied. He sounded sure.

“Well then,” I replied wittily, “then he was adopted into a Jewish family, wasn’t he? Just like me!”

“Only his father adopted him; his mother bore him.” This was getting weirder by the minute. I knew what he meant, more or less. But I wasn’t an expert on Christian theology, just a Jewish guy in law school who liked going to *shul* with his Dad back home on the Island and occasionally in New Haven too. And he was sounding more and more peculiar as we moved forward in our conversation, almost as though he were reading from a script.

“Okay,” I acquiesced. “But his dad adopted him, right? Just like mine!”

The conversation ended shortly after that exchange. And I *still* didn’t quite understand what I had gotten myself into.

The next week it was Albert’s turn, the tenth grader.

“Hello, brother,” he began when I picked up the phone.

I had noted the area code and knew it had to be one of them. “Arnold, is that you?” I asked.

“No, this is your brother Albert.”

That was “brother” twice in two sentences. I was getting a very uneasy feel about this whole thing and decided to be clear. “I have two brothers. Their names are Joseph and Joel. You are the son of my birth parents, but I’m not sure there’s such a thing as a ‘birth brother.’ We are related genetically, but...” I inhaled sharply both to gain a

moment but also to steady myself. "...we are not brothers. Not brothers at all! For one thing, I've never even met you. I wouldn't know you if I were standing in front of you."

Young Albert was not one to be put off easily. That, I had to hand to him. "Arnold told me that you are of the House of Israel," he said weirdly, avoiding the whole concept of "birth brothers." But I was focused on the "House of Israel" thing instead. Who talks that way? Was he so unnerved by the thought of saying the word "Jewish" out loud?

"Here's the story, Al. I am not your brother, nor am I your brother's brother. I am *my* brothers' brother. And, yes, I am of the House of Israel, a Jewish man who goes to law school and, occasionally, to synagogue." I sounded sure of myself, but deep inside I could feel some niggling doubts beginning to assert themselves. Was I entirely who I was—who I am—or was some tiny part of me also who I wasn't? Suddenly, I wasn't quite sure.

"Can we be friends?" He sounded a bit pathetic, almost as though he had gone off-script to say something from his heart. But he also sounded, for the first time, like a nice person, albeit like a very young one.

"No," I said, his niceness somehow prodding me back into reality. "We can know each other a little. We can stay in touch from a distance. But I have a family, just like you do. And I don't need another anymore than I suppose you do." It was becoming increasingly clear to me with every sentence what a huge error of judgment I had made starting in with these people. They were something to me, but not—I knew this clearly now—they were *not* my family. And no one's cause was going to be well served by obscuring that fact.

He hung up quickly after that last exchange. I thought I was done. I had now spoken with my two full brothers and with my birth father. Betty was free to call too, I supposed, but she hadn't and at this point that was entirely fine with me.

And then the bombardment started. Calls, including ones late at night, started coming from all sorts of local church groups near New Haven. Books, including bizarrely not

one but several Hebrew-language editions of the New Testament, and an endless number of pamphlets began appearing in my mailbox at school. My inbox was suddenly clogged with emails from all sorts of young men in and around Yale who thought that we could possibly go church together or even, if I was inclined, just for a walk. I noticed after a while that I was hearing only from men, never from women. I suppose that was part of the concept—they were plying me with comradeship, with the prospect of bonding intimately with pals who would stick with me through thick and thin, with manly intimacy. Embedded in all their calls was a kind of mistrust of women, I thought—or, at the very least, the peculiar notion that friendship is at its most profound a same-sex thing and thus, in their (no doubt) homophobic minds, the precise opposite of romance. At first, I was amused by the attention. But as the phone calls and emails became increasingly creepy and unsettling, I knew that I had to take a stand. And so I called the Bob's number, which went directly to voice mail. I didn't record a message. And then, before my courage ran out, I dialed Betty's number. She answered on the first ring.

"This is Sam Kaufman," I said clearly. "Do you know who I am?"

"I know," she said.

I was all ready to tell her why I was calling—to ask her to step in to prevent her boys or her husband or whoever had been masterminding this crazy effort to help me find my way to church—but before I could get a word out, she began to cry. At first, she was sobbing so hard that I couldn't really say anything at all. But then she calmed down and was apparently waiting for me to say something.

"Betty," I said, "I'm calling because I believe that Bill and the boys have embarked on something that I'm sure they think is very good, but which is actually very bad. And wholly unwanted. I don't know if they've actually committed any crimes by signing me up for this endless harassment, but I intend to find out if it doesn't stop." I knew I was sounding unkind, but I felt I had to be clear. I had begun to keep a log of phone calls and emails a few days after they began, and there were *already* over 100...and this was in a matter of less than one single month.

"Harassment," she half-asked, half-said, almost as though she didn't know the word.

“Harassment,” I echoed. “It’s clear to me that you bore me, that Bill fathered me. But you made a conscious decision to let other people raise me. And, guess what? Other people raised me. And they brought me into their faith, now my faith, which was their absolute right...and which, just for the record, is exactly what you and Bill would have done with a child the two of you adopted. This whole Jewish thing is not a role I’m playing in some play. It’s who I am and what I am...and I’m not looking to escape into some alternate universe that could only exist if the one we actually inhabit didn’t. And that’s why this has to stop.”

“Or you won’t be our son?” Now she was sounding even more pathetic than poor little Albert who only wanted me to be his friend.

“I am not your son,” I said, trying not to sound even slightly equivocal. “I’d like to come to Laramie and meet you. I’d like to exchange photographs and hear about each other’s lives. But I don’t need four parents.”

“You won’t believe this,” she said, ignoring that last comment, “but I’ve prayed for you every single day since the day you were born. I didn’t know where you were. I didn’t know who was raising you. But I prayed every day that you were safe and that you were happy. And I prayed that you would grow up to be a man confirmed in his faith, a man *off*faith.”

“I am not a man of no faith,” I said calmly. “I’m just not a man of your *specific* faith. So your prayers actually *were* answered.”

And now we got down to the real item on today’s agenda. “I don’t want you to go to hell,” she said quietly. “I’m praying for you to be saved.”

“Saved? Saved from what?”

“When you die, I don’t want my baby to go to hell,” she said again, her voice turning teary.

“If I go to hell, it will be because I wasn’t a good Jew, not because I wasn’t a good Christian,” I slightly surprised myself by saying. “And certainly not because I didn’t belong to your particular church.” I was clearly on a roll. “And I’m not your baby,” I

added for good measure. “And don’t tell me that you’re praying for me. You’re praying for yourself, for you to get what you want from a child you handed off to other people without knowing anything at all about them,” I continued, the rising tide of anger in my voice audible now. “Prayer isn’t when you ask God to undo your own past by altering someone else’s future because you don’t have a time machine and can’t do it yourself. For prayer to be real, it has to be selfless.” This, from a man who, up until about a minute earlier would have answered in the negative if anyone asked him if he took the concept of prayer all that seriously.

For a long while, she said nothing at all. And then she finally spoke. “Good-bye,” she said. “I’ll never stop praying for you.” And then she hung up without waiting for me to respond.

I never heard from any of them again. Eventually, the phone calls and emails stopped. I dropped all the New Testaments off at a Goodwill Store not far from my apartment. Not seeing any good that could possibly come of it, I never shared any of this with my Mom or Dad. Nor did I share any of this with my brothers.

I was altered by the whole experience, and in ways I couldn’t possibly have anticipated. My ears perk up whenever I hear anyone mention Wyoming. For a while, I wondered about the meaning of identity...and what the precise relationship was between who I am and who I could have been. I’m happy enough being myself. But when I look in the mirror, I don’t always see just my own face—sometimes I can also see the ghost of the other me, the me who could have been and maybe even should have been, the one raised by high school sweethearts who married as teenagers and found a way to move forward in life with a baby they didn’t abandon to his fate but whom they nurtured and embraced and loved. I see the ghost of that non-person, that non-Jew, that non-me...and then I blink a few times and he’s gone...and in his place is just me, an accidental man of the House of Israel. I don’t think of them often. But when I stand up to say my prayers in *shul*, I always pray for the family that might have been and never was, and for the people who accidentally gave me life and then stepped back so I could meet my own destiny. I suppose there’s irony in the fact that, after giving poor Betty such a hard time about praying for me, I’ve ended up

praying for them! And I mean it too, which surprises me still, even after all these years.