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THE VELVETEEN FATHER

JESSE GREEN



THE VELVETEEN FATHER

An Unexpected Journey
to Parenthood



JESSE GREEN



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First Edition

ALSO BY JESSE GREEN

O Beautiful

THE VELVETEEN FATHER

*For my parents
and for Andy:
origin and destination*

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse.

“It’s a thing that happens to you.

*When a child loves you for a long, long time,
not just to play with, but really loves you,
then you become Real.”*

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse.

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I



The
Designated
Daughter

ONE

“Mommy,” he said.

In the summer after his third birthday, Erez started asking for his mother, or at any rate for something he referred to by that name. “I’m going outside to find Mommy,” he informed us one day, quite jauntily, as if he were announcing a trip to his toy box. And then, as an afterthought: “Where is she?” Of course he could not reach the deadbolt yet, and anyway he was not quite sure what the word “mommy” meant. But he knew that his friend Aaron had one and that his friend Rosalie had two. And that he didn’t have any, at least not in the house.

It was, Andy tells me, among Erez’s first sounds—“ma”—just as it is for most children. “Ma” is the sound of first recourse, of merely opening the lips. It is the name that is there whether you speak it or not, “the invisible breath between every line,” as the poet James Merrill put it. But for Erez, the bleating syllable lacked a referent. Andy was his father; he had no mother; no one came when he uttered the world’s oldest word. Very soon after he started speaking it, the sound naturally fell into disuse, until it was hijacked several months later as the name for his favorite stuffed animal, a black-and-white cat even now called Ma’am—from the sound he had learned cats make, we assume.

He had no mother, but of course he did. Andy often told him the story, or part of the story, in the dark as Erez lay curling for sleep: *One day I walked from work and took the subway train to the bus and the bus to a plane, and the plane took me far away to another state, where a woman who was able to grow you inside her but could not take care of you was looking for a daddy to love you for*

the rest of your life. And I was that daddy. And I took you back to the plane to the bus and the bus to the subway—well, actually, this time, we took a cab—and brought you here to Brooklyn to be my son forever. Which perhaps explains Erez's mania for transportation, his every-night dreaming of trains.

For a while he asks a few times a week: "Where's Mommy?" Other times he says definitively: "Daddy is my mommy." This seems a piece of wisdom, but it is the wisdom of the stopped clock, correct twice a day. In the category of family relationships he is apt to say anything. "Mommy?" he says to a passing stranger. "Mommy?" he says to a woman whose child has just called her that. Or at television time, this: "Let's watch *Grandma Yankees!*"—inexplicably having altered the title of the musical *Damn Yankees* to suit some subterranean agenda. Wallace and Gromit, characters in a favorite video, have similarly turned into Wallace and Grandma. And I sometimes get turned into Uncle—a term someone must have used in his presence, or even deliberately taught him to use. But I'm not his uncle, any more than Gromit (a claymation dog) is his grandma. I'm his . . . well, no wonder he's confused.

He finds a picture in the drawer of a flea-market dry sink—a drawer so rarely opened by adults that it still contains news clippings and liquor bills from the man who owned it decades ago. What a party Sink Man threw in May of 1963! Here is an order for twenty-five bottles of wine plus an assortment of spirits and thick green liqueurs. But suddenly it's 1967 and here is a letter expressing sorrow over Sink Man's recent "tragedy": "I hope that time will enable you to overcome your present sadness. Fortunately, you are still very young so that much of your life is before you." The condolence—is it possible?—still reeks of pipe tobacco. And here is a photograph.

But before we even see what it is, Erez has torn the tiny picture in four. This is not surprising; he shreds, juliennes, or otherwise dismembers almost anything he particularly likes. Playing cards and the pasteboard sleeves of videotapes are helpless in his path; pop-up books may be totally harvested of their pop-ups within minutes if left undefended. Now he hands over the remains of a woman, taken in a photo booth in what seems, from her hairdo

and Peter Pan collar when reassembled, to be the late 1950s. She is young, a bit bulbous, smiling through lipstick; she has not yet had a child—and would she ever get to, before her “tragedy”? For she is the wife (or so I imagine) for whom Sink Man threw such a bibulous party, whom Sink Man lost not four years later.

“Mommy?” Erez says, dropping the bits merrily in my hand.

TWO

We do in fact have a photograph of Erez’s mother—his “birth mother,” as we are careful to call her, though it is a peculiar and somewhat defensive retronym. In the four-by-six glossy she is seated in a hospital chair in a hospital room, wearing a hospital gown and holding her newborn but looking at the camera, not even a half-smile but a quarter-smile on her face. She is not pretty and not ugly and has a bad shingle haircut, but there is an intense, magnetic, Carly Simon quality to her features—that is, if Carly Simon had just given birth and were holding the infant whom she had irrevocably agreed to give up to a stranger.

In the months since Andy had decided to seek an adoption, he took to calling the anonymous woman who would bear his child Concepción. In part this reflected a desire to define her by her biological role in the endeavor, to restrict her significance to that moment, some months earlier, when she had—what? Forgotten her diaphragm? Refused to use the one she had? And in part this reflected his assumption that she would be Hispanic, because the agency he was dealing with had a largely Hispanic clientele. But Erez’s birth mother (it turned out) was herself adopted and of unknown ethnic parentage. From the photograph you cannot tell; her face is pale with the exhaustion of labor and her features are too idiosyncratic to interpret. But if she was never sure of her background before, her newborn boy would have filled her in, for even at birth he had the high almond eyes and light-brown-sugar skin so typical of the Latin American *mélange*.

Well, she must already have known. She and the man who impregnated her—a man not merely white but Mormon—already had a child, an eighteen-month-old girl being raised by Concep-

ción's adoptive mother. Indeed, the girl was the reason Concepción had elected to give her newborn away in exchange for five thousand dollars in what the agency calls "expenses related to the pregnancy." As Concepción saw it, she was faced with a kind of Sophie's choice. "I have to take care of *myself* now," she wrote in her adoption plan, explaining why she would sign the papers. "I want to get myself into college, so I can get my daughter back." In another photograph we see that girl, Erez's full sister: a pretty little toddler with the same mixed features. She grins while clasping her father's blue jeans, though you cannot make him out because he's facing away, into a mirror, and the camera's flash obscures the reflection. Besides, like too many fathers, he has largely been cropped out of the picture; he is little more than a pair of pants.

But we have learned through various channels that Don (as I call him, short for "donor") was twenty years old, installed aluminum siding for a living, was tall, blond, very attractive and, unlikely as it seems, chipper and cheerful. Concepción, darker and moodier, held powerful sway over her handsome young boyfriend. At her command, and despite misgivings, he appeared at the adoption agency's office and obediently signed away his parental rights. Should we even know about this private drama? It was retailed sub rosa, for in a "closed" adoption the flow of information is tightly controlled so as to prevent the adopting parents from ever knowing the birth parents and, especially, vice versa. As a result, everything that was more than dull prose came to us unofficially or unexpectedly or around some more or less improper bend. What came to us straight, in Concepción's own hand and on lightly censored medical forms, was the kind of featureless, filled-with-holes story you might expect to read in a death notice. She was thirty-two—twelve years younger than Andy at the time, twelve years older than Don. She lived in the Southwest, working as a cashier in a state I won't name. She smoked cigarettes but didn't drink and had recently been taking cough medicine for a cold. She liked to ride motorcycles and also liked to read.

Perhaps it was because she felt she was relinquishing everything else that Concepción decided to reserve the most salient piece of information to herself. It was a social worker from the

adoption agency who told Andy that Concepción, having evaded drug screening through most of her pregnancy, finally tested positive for cocaine a few weeks before going into labor. Which may be why Andy, a single man who had just started waiting, was offered Baby Boy Blank (Concepción's last name has been obliterated in the medical records) five days after the child was born on March 4, 1994. Several other prospective parents—couples who had been waiting longer—had already declined. "He's very pretty," the social worker told Andy over the phone, trying to close the deal. "But there's a tremulousness which could be the result of his mother's drug use."

Tremulousness?

"He shakes," said the social worker. "As if he were nervous. It may go away. Do you still want him?"

THREE

Had he ever *not* wanted him? In Andy's file cabinet, among folders of clippings about foreign countries he hoped to visit—Chile, Turkey, India—I find a folder labeled ADOPTION, and in it news articles dating back to 1983. Even before that, it appears in retrospect, he had been shaping his life toward this unlikely moment, this most foreign of destinations. Or, for too long, misshaping.

Andy was born in the last week of 1949 to a Brooklyn Jewish family steeped in the traditions of small private enterprise and vast public education. His mother, unable to get a job as a buyer at Macy's at the beginning of the Depression, went on instead to teach high school English for thirty-six years. His father ran factories that made, among other apparel, cheap children's clothing. They worked hard and, in the manner of such stories, prospered sufficiently to give Andy and his older brother trumpet lessons, college educations, and, posthumously, two Brooklyn brownstones. They did not, however, give Andy the fundamental sensation of perfect safety that deludes some children into growing up happy. They couldn't; they hadn't had it themselves and wouldn't have known how to invent it from scratch. Instead they educated

and clothed other children, came home exhausted, drank casually but continuously until they fell asleep.

When Andy tells me this last detail I have trouble believing him; my parents still have, in a closet, liquor from my bar mitzvah luncheon. I had always previously subscribed to the message of the great, scary joke: *Why don't Jews drink? Because it blunts the pain of living.*

And yet Andy's parents do not disprove the joke. Janet and Lewis were witty, principled people who loved their sons but numbed themselves so successfully that despite their love, and expertise, they couldn't help Andy with his math. Could they have helped what happened when he was seven, when his brother, Frank, sprayed lighter fluid at the smoldering barbecue while Andy leaned over the coals, watching? Janet and Lewis were inside, upstairs, preparing the hamburgers and greeting the guests, as the barbecue exploded in Andy's face. Many years and several painful debriding procedures later, the flames still fork, albeit faintly, across his neck and jawline, only now they are made of ropy scar tissue instead of substanceless heat and light. The best care was obtained, of course, but what had happened and what it meant were never discussed. Even so, the accident helped to shape at least one person: Frank eventually became a scientist, specializing in industrial health and safety.

In a way, though, we are all shaped by our accidents. Once burned, twice shy. Andy did not ever again venture far from his parents' purview. Rather, he confined himself quite narrowly within the contours they had drawn: He went into small private enterprise and vast public education. He runs the family business, which is no longer clothing but the two handsome buildings that clothing bought. And he has been an employee of the New York City Board of Education since he was twenty, as an English teacher until 1984 and as a guidance counselor thereafter. Where I grew up, in an affluent suburb of Philadelphia, guidance counselors were administrative nonentities who signed your schedule and occasionally said things like "Brown's got a good reputation, have you thought of Brown?" At Andy's school in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, he is more likely to find himself

saying things like “What did the others do while your father beat you up?” The afternoon club he runs isn’t Little Theater or Junior Achievement but the Pregnancy Prevention Program. For a fair number of the fifteen-year-old girls enrolled at his school, the club is already too late.

In his commitment to teaching and in his love of cheap clothing, Andy was living out his parents’ priorities; he even lived in one of their houses. But he was, in at least one fundamental way, quite different from them: He would not, it appeared, be a parent himself. Having (as he puts it) dated women chronically and men intermittently, having stepped gingerly out of and back into the closet several times during early adulthood—his was a closet with a revolving door—Andy identified himself as a gay man for good by 1980. Thereafter, periods of relative monogamy alternated with periods of intense (albeit safe) promiscuity, leaving him by 1994 with a ghostly address book of dead acquaintances but also with a small solar system of former lovers in rather close orbit. He no longer questioned his sexuality; he was active in gay politics and AIDS charities and wore a modest earring and marched in liberation parades. What he had begun to question was what liberation had liberated him for.

FOUR

At the time Concepción was giving birth, Andy was living with a man he called, somewhat coolly, his “ex-lover-to-be.” It had already been decided that Elliot would be moving out, though the date kept not getting set. Elliot and Andy had been a couple for six years by then. For most of that time they had clacked off each other like billiard balls, making the relationship feel, at least to Andy, intimate and yet somehow provisional. Looking back on it now, I think it was a case of two people who had not really figured out what their life’s goals were separately—who could therefore not figure out what they might be together.

There had already been, for instance, the Debacle of the Karens, as I’ll call them here—though in fact the name the two