


# BLACK BOX

AMOS OZ

Translated from the Hebrew by  
NICHOLAS DE LANGE  
in collaboration with the author

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VINTAGE BOOKS NEW YORK  
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# ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am grateful to William Jovanovich  
and the Colorado College community  
for providing me with a peaceful year in which I could write  
the major part of this novel.

*But you, you knew the night is still and silent,  
And I alone remain alert and brood.  
I am the only victim of your weeping:  
The beast has fixed his eye on me to be his only food.*

*At times I shudder suddenly and tremble,  
I wander, lost, and panic drives me wild:  
I hear you calling me from all directions,  
I feel like a blind man being tormented by a child.*

*But you, you hid your face. You did not stop me,  
With pigeon's blood and darkness in your tears,  
Entangled in the dark, remotely sobbing,  
Where memory or sense or understanding disappears.*

From "Weeping" by Natan Alterman

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amos Oz was born in Jerusalem in 1939. At the age of fourteen he joined Kibbutz Hulda, where he lived, taught, and wrote for many years. A veteran of the 1967 and 1973 wars, Oz has since been active in various efforts seeking reconciliation with the Arabs. He now lives in Arad, Israel.

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James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann,  
E.M. Forster, Isak Dinesen, Albert Camus, Günter Grass,  
V.S. Naipaul, Doris Lessing, Gabriel García Márquez,  
Wole Soyinka, Salman Rushdie, Primo Levi, among many others:  
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Dr. Alexander A. Gideon  
Political Science Department  
Midwest University  
Chicago, Ill., U.S.A.

Jerusalem  
5.2.76

Dear Alec,

If you didn't destroy this letter the moment you recognized my handwriting on the envelope, it shows that curiosity is stronger than hatred. Or else that your hatred needs fresh fuel.

Now you are going pale, clenching your wolfish jaws in that special way of yours, so that your lips disappear, and storming down these lines to find out what I want from you, what I dare to want from you, after seven years of total silence between us.

What I want is that you should know that Boaz is in a bad way. And that you should help him urgently. My husband and I can't do anything, because Boaz has broken off all contact. Like you.

Now you can stop reading, and throw this letter straight on the fire. (For some reason I always imagine you in a long, book-lined room, sitting alone at a black desk, with white snow-covered plains stretching away beyond the window opposite. Plains without hill or tree, dazzling arid snow. And a fire blazing in the fireplace on your left, and an empty glass, and an empty bottle on the empty desk in front of you. The whole image is in black and white. You too: monkish, ascetic, haughty, and all in black and white.)

Now you crumple up the letter, humming in a British sort of way, and shoot it accurately onto the fire: what do you care about Boaz? And, in any case, you don't believe a word I'm saying. Here you fix your grey eyes on the flickering fire and say to yourself: She's

trying to pull a fast one again. That female won't ever give up or let be.

☹ Why then am I writing to you?

In despair, Alec. Of course, when it comes to despair, you're a world authority. (Yes, naturally, I read—like everybody else—your book *The Desperate Violence: A Study in Comparative Fanaticism*.) But what I am talking about now is not your book but the substance of which your soul is fashioned: frozen despair. Arctic despair.

Are you still reading? Feeding your hatred of us? Tasting *schadenfreude* like expensive whisky, in small sips? If so, I'd better stop teasing you, and concentrate on Boaz.

The plain fact is that I haven't the faintest idea how much you know. I shouldn't be the least bit surprised if it turned out that you knew every detail, that you have instructed your lawyer, Zakheim, to send you monthly reports about our lives, that you've been keeping us on your radar screen all these years. On the other hand, I wouldn't be astonished to discover that you don't know anything at all: neither that I've married a man called Michael (Michel-Henri) Sommo, nor that I've had a daughter, nor what's become of Boaz. It would be just like you to turn your back with one brutal gesture and cut us once and for all out of your new life.

After you kicked us out, I took Boaz and we went to stay with my sister and her husband in their kibbutz. (We didn't have anywhere else to go, and we didn't have any money, either.) I lived there for six months and then I came back to Jerusalem. I worked in a bookshop. Meanwhile Boaz stayed in the kibbutz for another five years, until he was thirteen. I used to go and see him every three weeks. That's how it was until I married Michel, and ever since then the boy has called me a whore. Just like you. He didn't come to see us once in Jerusalem. When we told him our daughter (Madeleine Yifat) was born, he slammed the phone down.

Then two years ago he suddenly turned up one winter's night at one o'clock in the morning to inform me that he was through with the kibbutz, and either I send him to an agricultural high

school or he'll go and "live on the streets" and that'll be the last I'll hear from him.

My husband woke up and told him to get out of his wet clothes, eat something, have a good wash, and go to bed, and tomorrow morning we'd talk. And the boy (even then, at thirteen and a half, he was a good bit taller and broader than Michel) replied, as though he were crushing an insect underfoot, "And who are you, anyway? Who asked you?" Michel chuckled and answered, "I suggest you step outside, chum, calm down, change the cassette, knock on the door, and come in all over again, and this time try to act like a human being instead of a gorilla."

Boaz turned toward the door. But I put myself between him and the doorway. I knew he wouldn't touch me. The baby woke up and started crying, and Michel went off to change her and warm some milk for her in the kitchen. I said, "All right, Boaz. You can go to agricultural school if that's what you really want." Michel, standing there in his underwear holding the baby, who was quiet, added, "Only on condition you say 'sorry' to your mother and ask nicely and then say 'thank you.' What are you, anyway, a horse?" And Boaz, his face contorted with that desperate loathing and contempt he's inherited from you, whispered to me, "And you let that *thing* fuck you every night?" and immediately afterward he stretched his hand out and touched my hair and said, in a different voice, which wrings my heart when I remember it, "But your baby's quite pretty."

Then (thanks to the influence of Michel's brother) we got Boaz into Telamim Agricultural High School. That was two years ago, at the beginning of 1974, not long after the war that you—so I was told—came back from America to take part in as commander of a tank battalion in the Sinai, before running off again. We even gave in to his request not to go and visit him. We paid the fees and kept quiet. That is to say, Michel paid. Well not exactly Michel, either.

We did not receive so much as a single postcard from Boaz during these two years. Only alarms from the headmistress. The boy is violent. The boy got in a quarrel and smashed open the night

watchman's head. The boy disappears at night. The boy has a police record. The boy has been put on probation. The boy will have to leave the school. This boy is a monster.

And what do you remember, Alec? The last thing you saw was a creature of eight, long and thin and sandy, like a cornstalk, standing silently for hours on end on a stool, leaning on your desk, concentrating, making model airplanes out of balsa for you from do-it-yourself booklets you brought him—a careful, disciplined, almost timid child, although even then, at the age of eight, he was capable of overcoming humiliations with a kind of silent, controlled determination. And in the meantime, like a genetic time bomb, Boaz is now sixteen, six foot three and still growing, a bitter, wild boy whose hatred and loneliness have invested him with astonishing physical strength. And this morning the thing that I have been expecting for a long time finally happened: an urgent telephone call. They have decided to throw him out of the boarding school, because he assaulted one of the women teachers. They declined to give me the details.

Well, I went down there at once, but Boaz refused to see me. He merely sent word that he didn't want "to have anything to do with that whore." Was he talking about the teacher? Or about me? I do not know. It turned out that he had not exactly "assaulted" her: he had uttered some sick joke, she had given him a slap in the face, and he had instantly given her two in return. I pleaded with them to postpone the expulsion until I could make other arrangements. They took pity on me and gave me a fortnight.

Michel says that, if I like, Boaz can stay here with us (even though the two of us and the baby live in one and a half rooms, for which we are still repaying the mortgage). But you know as well as I do that Boaz won't agree to that. That boy loathes me. And you. So we do have something in common, you and I, after all. I'm sorry.

There's no chance that they'll take him at another vocational school, either, with his police record and the probation officer on his back. I'm writing to you because I don't know what to do. I'm writing to you even though you won't read this, and if you do, you

won't reply. At the very best you'll instruct your lawyer Zakheim to send me a formal letter begging to remind me that his client still denies paternity, that the blood test did not produce an unambiguous result, and that it was I who at the time adamantly opposed a tissue test. Checkmate.

Yes, and the divorce released you of any responsibility for Boaz and any obligation toward me. I know all that by heart, Alec. I have no room for hope. I am writing to you as though I were standing at the window talking to the mountains. Or to the darkness between the stars. Despair is your field. If you like, you can treat me as a specimen.

Are you still thirsting for vengeance? If so, I am hereby turning the other cheek. Mine, and Boaz's too. Go ahead, hit as hard as you can.

Yes, I will send you this letter, even though just now I put the pen down and made up my mind not to bother; after all, I've nothing to lose. Every way ahead is blocked. You have to realize this: even if the probation officer or the social worker manages to persuade Boaz to undergo some kind of treatment, rehabilitation, aid, a transfer to another school (and I don't believe they'd succeed), I haven't got the money to pay for it.

Whereas you've got plenty, Alec.

And I have no connections, whereas you can get anything fixed up with a couple of phone calls. You are strong and clever. Or at least you were seven years ago. (People have told me you've had two operations. They couldn't tell me what sort.) I hope you're all right now. I won't say more than that, so you won't accuse me of hypocrisy. Flattery. Bootlicking. And I won't deny it, Alec: I'm still prepared to lick your boots as much as you like. I'll do anything you ask of me. And I mean anything. Just so long as you rescue your son.

If I had any brains, I'd cross out "your son" and write "Boaz," so as not to infuriate you. But how can I cross out the plain truth? You are his father. And as for my brains, didn't you make up your mind a long time ago that I'm a total moron?

I'll make you an offer. I'm prepared to admit in writing, in

the presence of a notary, if you like, that Boaz is the son of anyone you want me to say. My self-respect was killed long ago. I'll sign any bit of paper your lawyer puts in front of me if, in return, you agree to give Boaz first aid. Let's call it humanitarian assistance. Let's call it an act of kindness to a totally strange child.

It's true; when I stop writing and conjure him up, I stand by these words: Boaz is a strange child. No, not a child. A strange man. He calls me a whore. You he calls a dog. Michel, "little pimp." He calls himself (even on official documents) by my maiden name, Boaz Brandstetter. And the school we had to pull strings to get him into, at his own request, he calls Devil's Island.

Now I'll tell you something you can use against me. My in-laws in Paris send us a little money each month to keep him in this boarding school, even though they have never set eyes on Boaz and he has probably never so much as heard of their existence. And they are not at all well off (they're immigrants from Algeria); and they have, besides Michel, five more children and eight grandchildren, in France and Israel.

Listen, Alec: I'm not going to write a word about what happened in the past. Apart from one thing, something I'll never forget, even though you'll probably wonder how on earth I know about it. Two months before our divorce, Boaz was taken to Shaarei Zedek Hospital with a kidney infection. And there were complications. You went without my knowledge to Dr. Blumenthal to find out whether, if necessary, an adult could donate a kidney to an eight-year-old child. You were planning to give him one of your own kidneys. And you warned the doctor that you would make only one condition: that I (and the child) should never know. And I didn't until I made friends with Dr. Adorno, Blumenthal's assistant, the young doctor you were planning to sue for criminal negligence over Boaz's treatment.

If you are still reading, at this moment you're probably going even whiter, snatching up your lighter with a gesture of strangled violence and putting the flame to your lips (because your pipe isn't there) and saying to yourself all over again: Of course. Dr. Adorno.

Who else? And if you haven't destroyed the letter already, this is the moment when you destroy it. And me and Boaz too.

And then Boaz got better and then you kicked us out of your house, your name, and your life. You never donated any kidney. But I do believe that you seriously intended to. Because everything about you is serious. That much I will grant you—you are serious.

Flattering you again? If you want, I plead guilty. Flattering. Bootlicking. Going down on my knees in front of you and hitting my forehead on the ground. Like the good old days.

Because I've got nothing to lose and I don't mind begging. I'll do whatever you command. Only don't take too long, because in a fortnight they throw him out on the street. And the street is out there waiting for him.

After all, nothing in the world is beyond you. Unleash that monster of yours, your lawyer. Maybe with some string pulling they'll take him into the naval college. (Boaz has a strange attraction to the sea; he has had ever since he was a small child. Do you remember, Alec, in Ashkelon, the summer of the Six-Day War? The whirlpool? Those fishermen? The raft?)

And one last thing, before I seal this letter: I'll even sleep with you if you want. When you want. And any way you want. (My husband knows about this letter and even agreed that I should write it—apart from the last sentence. So now if you feel like destroying me, you can simply photocopy the letter, underline the last sentence with your red pencil, and send it to my husband. It'll work like a charm. I admit it: I was lying when I wrote earlier that I have nothing to lose.)

And so, Alec, we are now all completely at your mercy. Even my little daughter. And you can do anything you like to us.

*Ilana (Sommo)*

Mrs. Halina Brandstetter-Sommo  
No. 7 Tarnaz Street  
Jerusalem, Israel

London  
18.2.76

EXPRESS

Dear Madam,

Your letter of the 5th inst. was forwarded to me only yesterday from the United States. I shall refer to only a small part of the matters you chose to raise therein.

This morning I spoke on the telephone with an acquaintance in Israel. Following this conversation the headmistress of your son's school telephoned me on her own initiative. It was agreed between us that the expulsion is canceled and his record will simply carry a warning. If, nevertheless, your son prefers—as is vaguely hinted in your letter—to transfer to a cadet school, I have reasonable grounds for supposing that that can be arranged (via my lawyer, Mr. Zakheim). Mr. Zakheim will also convey to you a check in the sum of two thousand dollars (in Israeli pounds and in your husband's name). Your husband will be asked to acknowledge in writing receipt of this sum as a gift to you on account of hardship, and not in any sense as a precedent or as an admission of any obligation on our part. Your husband will also be required to give an assurance that no further appeals will be forthcoming from you in the future (I hope that his indigent and very extended family in Paris is not planning to follow your example and demand pecuniary favors from me). Over the remaining contents of your letter, including the gross lies, the gross contradictions, and the simple common, or garden, grossness, I shall pass in silence.

[Signed] A. A. Gideon

P.S. I am retaining your letter.

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Dr. Alexander A. Gideon  
London School of Economics  
London, England

Jerusalem  
27.2.76

Dear Alec,

As you know, last week we signed on the dotted line and received the money from your lawyer. But now Boaz has left his school and he has been working for several days in the central market in Tel Aviv with a wholesale greengrocer who is married to one of Michel's cousins. It was Michel who fixed him up with the job, at Boaz's request.

This is how it happened: After the headmistress told Boaz the news that he was not going to be expelled, but only cautioned, the boy simply picked up his kit bag and disappeared. Michel got in touch with the police (he has some relations there), and they informed us that they were holding the kid in custody in Abu Kabir for possession of stolen goods. A friend of Michel's brother, who has a senior position in the Tel Aviv police, had a word with Boaz's probation officer on our behalf. After some complications we got him out on bail.

We used part of your money for this. I know that was not what you had in mind when you gave it to us, but we simply don't have any other money: Michel is merely a nonqualified French teacher in a religious state school, and his salary after deduction of our mortgage payments is barely enough to feed us. And there is also our little girl (Madeleine Yifat, almost three).

I must tell you that Boaz hasn't the faintest idea where the money for his bail came from. If he had been told, I think he would have spat on the money, the probation officer, and Michel. As it was, to start with he flatly refused to be released and asked to be "left alone."

Michel went to Abu Kabir without me. His brother's friend (the police officer) arranged for him and Boaz to be alone together in the office at the police station, so they could talk privately. Michel said to him, Look, maybe you've somehow forgotten who I am.