

ISMAEL AND IMMANUEL

excerpt from the novel-in-progress

TEL AVIV'S ETHIOPIAN QUEEN

by Albert Russo

With his cherubic good looks, his delicate features, and his fluid gait, Ismael attracts both girls and boys older than him. It's a bit of a problem because he is only fifteen and a half and people have difficulty believing when he tells them his age.

Ismael knocked at my door two years ago, pathetically thin, sweating and dishevelled, his shirt missing two buttons and eyes so red, it seemed as if all his blood vessels had burst out. He was panting and I couldn't understand a word of what he was trying to say. I told him to sit down in the arm chair next to mine and to rest while I went to get some cold water.

"Now drink, slowly, and you'll talk later, when you catch your breath. There is nothing to fear here, so try to be calm." I said, collecting myself after the sudden shock his appearance caused a few minutes earlier.

I got up again and opened the two small facing windows of the entrance, to let in a breeze, for it was a hot day and the boy's shirt was wet with perspiration. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and set his glass on the table. I couldn't suffer to see him in such a state and, clearing my voice, I said:

“You know what, we’ll have all the time to talk later. I want you first to go and have a shower and you’ll put on clean clothes. We have everything you need here.”

Ismael gave me a strange look, as if he’d just seen a ghost. Who was that person who gave him orders, with such authoritarian benevolence? Did he make a mistake coming here, even if the address had been recommended by an older friend of his? Could this be another trap? His mind was racing and he closed his eyes for a few seconds, opened them again, then, he bolted up and followed me upstairs.

Ismael was born and grew up in al-Tira, an Arab town in the central district of Israel. He was the youngest of a family of three children, and both sisters doted on him. As a matter of fact he was his parents’ favorite, for he was the boy they always wanted. He was a good student, fluent in Arabic and Hebrew, with a basic knowledge of English, but he excelled in maths and science, and he dreamt of becoming one day an electronic engineer. Didn’t he live in the so-called Start-up Nation? From the outside, everything looked perfect. His father ran a convenience store that was succesful enough for him and his family to live comfortably in a cosy apartment, with all the modern amenities. His mother took care of the household and had enough to do, cooking, sewing and mending clothes, and keeping the place spotless. It had four small bedrooms, one for his parents, another one for the two girls, and the narrowest one for the boy, which suited him fine, for it had a desk, where he could read and study without being disturbed.

But Ismael harbored a dark secret, and it had to do with his widowed uncle Rashid who, childless, and after the death of his wife, came to live with the family. Ismael was about eleven when it all started. Af first he was flattered that his uncle thought so high of him, making compliments on how good a pupil he was and how studious and serious he was. “This little Ismael will all make us proud.” He would often say when the family was reunited at the dinner table, adding, “I’m sure some of his classmates must be jealous of him, he’s so neat and well-behaved”. Ismael would blush and give a half-smile, but after a while, those remarks would embarrass him. Why did uncle Rashid ‘pick’ on him with such

insistence? He never spoke about the girls that way. Thankfully, they didn't take it in or bear their brother any grudge. They seemed to agree with uncle Rashid's good words wholeheartedly, and so did the parents.

One night, after everybody had repaired to their rooms, Ismael heard a slight knock at his door. It was uncle Rashid.

"What is it uncle? Did you have another sad dream about auntie Leila?" asked the boy who had heard him several times lamenting to his father over the loss of his wife.

"Yes, dear boy, how empathic you are for your age, bless you." He answered as he gently moved to Ismael's bed and sat next to him. "In spite of the love you all show me," he added, "I feel very lonely at times. A man needs a companion by his side."

Ismael felt genuine compassion for this uncle, nearing his sixtieth birthday, who had always shown him so much affection. The boy gently stroked his hand in a gesture of appeasement and murmured:

"I'm sad to see you like this, Uncle Rashid, next time you feel low, come and speak to me. You did promise to tell me stories about grandfather and how brave he was during the war of Independence."

A tear slid from the man's left eye, leaving a trail of dewlike flecks. The uncle then suddenly cupped the boy's head with both hands and kissed him on the mouth, something he had never done before. In the family, kisses were always given on the cheek. A little startled, Ismael slowly pulled away and blushed. But he just as soon reckoned that his uncle was seized by a surge of emotion and didn't think twice about it, especially since the man instantly stood up, bid goodnight and left the room, whispering: "... such a wonderful nephew, Allah will repay you for all your kindness."

Uncle Rashid came back to the boy's room two nights later, a little before 9.30, for he knew that Ismael read, against his parents' injunctions, about a quarter hour, and then only switched off the light of his bedside table.

Again, the man sat close to his nephew, who, because it was a little hot, lay on top of the bed sheet, with just his Disney nightshirt on, so that he didn't need to switch on the electric fan. His father had warned every member of the household to be spare on electricity, except during heatwaves like the hamsin.

Uncle Rashid looked less worried this time, and as he started recounting some of the feats of his swashbuckling father, catching Ismael's ecstatic attention, he began to caress the boy's head, then his cheeks. He was careful not to linger with these gestures of affection, lest his nephew become suspicious. Having made the boy laugh as he was telling him a funny anecdote, this time he patted his arms, and before getting up, pressed his mouth against Ismael's lips, wetting them slightly with the tip of his tongue. The boy was somewhat confused but still preferred to think that what he felt was sweat, after all the temperature hovered at around 27 degrees centigrade.

That night, Ismael had a very strange dream. It was about him and his uncle. They were both trudging in the Negev desert in the early afternoon. The sun was blazing and he had to blink, the rays were so strong. His uncle was walking ahead of him and as the minutes passed, the latter's shadow loomed larger and larger, until it blocked the light of day.

Gradually, the uncle became bolder with Ismael, always sweet talking to him, until he invaded the young boy's intimate parts with his fingers. At first, the boy thought that maybe that was how some grownups expressed their lack of affection, specially a man who, as he kept lamenting, felt so lonesome. This made Ismael ill at ease, for he couldn't turn to anybody about what was going on in his room. And he wasn't the type either to discuss such matters even with Mahmood, his best friend at school.

He was now twelve years old, and on the threshold of manhood, when the uncle began to fondle him more heavily, slowly penetrating his body. Ismael then realized that his uncle had gone too far and asked him to stop coming to his room. The latter's reaction was very unusual and, before closing the door behind him he whinged like an old woman:

"After all the affection and care I showed you all these years, I would never had expected such ingratitude on your part. I helped you become a man, and this is how you're paying me back. I don't wish ever to speak to you again."

Ismael was so shocked by his uncle Rashid's attitude that he spent sleepless nights and began losing weight, for he felt terribly guilty. What did he do that was so wrong? Did his uncle speak in good faith? Was it then 'normal' the way he treated his nephew? No, he couldn't believe that. He had vaguely heard about pedofiles on a TV program.

One day his father summoned Ismael to the living room while his mother was in the kitchen, preparing lunch. The girls were still at school.

"Uncle Rashid who loves you so much warned me about you. Listen my boy, I will not tolerate any fag in my house, do you hear me? I'd rather have a dead son. And this is my last word."

His father looked at him with a harshness bordering on hate, and left him sitting alone, trembling in every limb with fear and rage, rage because of the monstrous lie the uncle had told his brother-in-law.

Sensing that he would no longer be able to face his family and that they would automatically take his uncle's side, Ismael left the following morning before anybody woke up, with a knapsack, never to return to his home.

Another boy for whom I have strong feelings is Immanuel. He escaped the Jewish ultra-Orthodox ghetto of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem, wandering for weeks from one place to

another before he found us. It took almost a year to cure him from his drug addiction. He was thirteen and a half when he entered the shelter. Like most of the folk of Mea Shearim he had the sickly paleness of those who are never exposed to the sun, spending the better part of their days studying the Torah, heavily clothed in black, wearing pants tucked into their socks and a coat covering it all, like their Polish forebears, and this in all seasons, no matter what the temperature is, which is totally unnatural, and I would add, downright cruel, when in Summer most Israeli youngsters run around in shorts, sandals and loose t-shirts. These poor people are known to lackin vitamin D and are prone to a number of illness, since they also have eating disorders and are lacking in certain necessary antibodies. Six months after he joined us, Immanuel had metamorphosed into a real hunk and gained a healthy complexion, if still quiet fair.

Among my boys, the two more handsome were Ismael and Immanuel, albeit in opposite ways, the former having the delicate features of those alluring youth painted by Botticelli, while the latter had the more virile looks of an ancient Greek javelin thrower, having developed nice muscles through regular work out, a novelty for him which he seemed to enjoy particularly, thus discovering, by the same token, the benefits of caring for one's own body, and gaining a new freedom of movement, denied him in his prevous life. He also fully enjoyed the lightness of his new clothes. Immanuel could now walk in the streets, head high, for he was no longer different from his peers, and most importantly, nobody would pay any attention to him, the way they did, during the rare times, he and his parents came out of Mea Shearim, especially since the people of that ghetto - reminding one of the typical shtetles you encountered in pre-WWII Russia or Poland - have the reputation of being intolerant of the ways of the lay majority, like insulting scantily clad girls at a bus stations, or hurling stones at passing cars during Shabbat. The general population, being

used to such comportment, either raise their eyebrows or sometimes just mumble: 'weirdoes'.

In the beginning, when I became aware of that fringe of Jews who lived exclusively by the precepts of the Torah, ignoring all that which the majority of Israelis stand for - they don't work, they maintain gender separation, refuse to send their children to serve in the army, and despise the secular world around them -, I was surprised to see that, contrary to the melting pot of America, they were a part of the amazing patchwork of Israeli society, along with the country's other numerous minorities, such as the two million Muslim Arab Israelis, my own group, the Ethiopian Jews, the Bene Israel from India, the Yemenite Jews, the Christian Arabs, the Arameans, the Black Hebrew Israelites, who are African-Americans, the Jehovah Witnesses, the Jews for Jesus, the Desert Bedouins, the Druze whose religion they keep secret, but who nevertheless proclaim themselves to remain loyal to the State of Israel.

A number of different sectors within the society are segregated, as they insist on maintaining their particular identities. Although there are social cleavages and economic disparities, Israeli society is a relatively balanced and stable one, for there is hardly any social conflict between the different ethnic or religious groups here, compared to what one often sees in Europe or in the United States. Demonstrations and protest in Israel are never violent, whether they are about social grievances or political discontent. And it is not because of the police, which you almost never see around.

Instead of always blaming Israel for all the ills of the world, or calling it an apartheid country, the UN and the West, who don't seem to have a clue of what this place is all about, or, if they do, they act in an abhorrent bad faith, should take example on it, in spite of its imperfections. I, personally, see it going in the right direction, with the second and third generation of children whose folks have emigrated here, mixing into a rainbow nation. I have never seen, in California or elsewhere, a youth so colorful and so well integrated, as

exists here. Again, this doesn't mean that there aren't, within or between families, or between different ethnic groups, tragic situations. I, for one, am well placed to know this.

The drama with Immanuel started six months before he arrived at the shelter. He was tutored, as is sometimes the case in Yeshivas (religious schools), by a student, three years his senior. Ofir started inviting the boy to his house, in the privacy of his room, so that he could go over the passages of the Torah which needed further clarification. After a month, Immanuel had made great progress, earning the plaudits of his teacher and his fellow students. Encouraged by the results, Ofir and his protégé continued to work together. One evening, seeing that, after a full two hours of work, the boy was frowning from fatigue, Ofir said, with a broad smile:

"We'll take a break. You can rest on my bed whilst I'll go and fetch us some grape juice and a few cookies my mom baked."

By the time Ofir came back with a tray, Immanuel was dozing. Ofir quietly set the tray on top of a small round table and tiptoed to the door, locking it very slowly, lest the boy should be startled. He then walked to the other side of the bed and lay down next to him. He stared at Immanuel as if it was the first time that he saw him. "Until now, I had never realized how beautiful this boy was." he thought. And he gently laid the palm of his hand over Immanuel's forehead. The boy opened his eyes, still in a daze, and simpered, as if he had always awaited such a moment. Then Ofir kissed the boy and started fondling his body, whilst he undressed him. Immanuel's heart was now pounding. How often he had dreamt of lying with another boy, knowing full well that such acts were an abomination, but he couldn't help having these sexual urges, which had intensified since he had reached the age of puberty and made his bar mitzvah. Somewhat astonished by the boldness of the young boy, Ofir took off his clothes and gently caressed the boy, running his fingers all over his body.

“I want you to make love to me, Ofir,” whispered the young boy, “I have always hoped this moment would come, ever since we met at the yeshiva.”

From then on, the time of their sexual intercourse prevailed over that allotted to their studies. One evening, in the frenzy of wanting to possess his young lover, Ofir forgot to lock the door of his room. That is when his father, walking down the corridor, heard a strange noise, and, puzzled, suddenly opened the door, catching the two adolescents in the act.

He was speechless and horrified, but after a moment of hesitation he started beating his son like he had never done. Immanuel quickly picked up his clothes, got dressed and ran away.

It was hushed, for no one but the parents of the two boys should know about it, for such a scandal would have put the two families to shame in the community. Immanuel was locked in his room for days, with the meals brought to him by his mother, who never uttered a word and avoided to look at him. A week had passed when his father confronted the boy and posed Immanuel this question:

“Have you repented, promising never to repeat this abomination? In any case, you shall move to your uncle Baruch’s at Bnei Brak, for we don’t want you here among us any longer.”

But instead of joining his uncle at Bnei Brak, Immanuel fled forever the stifling world of ultra-orthodoxy in which he grew up.

He first looked for a place of refuge in Jerusalem itself and found a local LGBT address. He was welcomed but he couldn’t remain there more than a few days, they just didn’t have the facilities for lengthy stays. The little time he spent there did him a world of good, discussing with other gay youngsters, exchanging ideas and even making friends.

It was just as well that he couldn't stay at the center, and he decided to leave Jerusalem altogether, for one day or other he might bump into an acquaintance, or worse, a member of his family. Now he is with us, in relative safety.

Ismael came to me last night, before preparing to his bedroom, which he shares with Immanuel. He was biting his lower lip and uttered unintelligible words at first. I understood that he was troubled and invited him to sit next to me and relax for a while. Then he spoke softly:

"You know that Immanuel and I are great buddies, and we do so many things together. Actually we like the same things, swimming in the sea, going to the cinema, even studying together. Yet, there is something that ... bothers me ... How should I say this? I don't want to hurt him and be disloyal, for he is my best friend."

He was ill at ease and hesitating. I read his thoughts, "Shall I come out with it or not, without creating irreparable damage?" I had to make him feel comfortable opening up to me, and said:

"Don't keep it in, whatever it is, for you know you can always trust me, and I won't do anything that would harm or put you in danger."

At first, his eyes gleamed and I noticed a thin wet film covering them. He gave out a sigh and finally unburdened his heart:

"It's, it's that Mani confessed that he's in love with me. At first, I was flattered, because I thought that what he meant was that I was his very best friend. Then he looked at me for a long time, before kissing me on the mouth. I never expected such a gesture and was taken aback. He kissed me again, and I stood there frozen. How could I reject him, and yet make him understand that my friendship has nothing to do with what just happened? I didn't have the strength of pushing him away. But last night, when he slipped in my bed and started fondling me, I said: 'Don't Mani, give me time to think.' And he went back to his

bed. But, Zivette, I don't want to have this relationship with Mani. What am I to do, how can I tell him? I don't want to lose him!"

Ismael began to sob, his brows knitting in sadness. That was a tough one, and I had to think hard before I could advise him. Mani was gay all right, it wasn't just a posture, and he was proud of his sexuality, especially since he came to live in Tel Aviv, where being gay is just as normal as being heterosexual. You just had to see how free same-sex couples acted, all over town, some, pushing prams while strolling with their dogs, and exchanging parent-child experiences with hetero couples, in parks, at the beach, or when taking their kids to school. No stigma here, whatsoever. This attitude is like nowhere else in the democratic capitals of the world, not New York, not LA, not Paris, not London, not even San Francisco, where such comportment is kept low-keyed and in very restricted areas, the moral majority being fiercely protective of their marriage-is-just-between-man-and-woman principles, and that there is no way they would expose their children to the abomination represented by homos, especially if they appeared in full light with their own 'little bastards', who would accompany their 'sinning' fathers or mothers to hell one day. I wonder whether this kind of reaction would ever disappear. This takes place in advanced countries, what about the dictatorships or, even worse, the Islamic regimes that, in many cases, mete out the death penalty to gay people? Our world here too is in a sorry state. And once again, I say, what a privilege it is to live in Tel Aviv, no matter what other problems we might have to face! This is the way for a better future, not only in Israel, but an example to be followed by the rest of the world.

The young boy was now deep in thought, but had no more tears, his forehead smooth again, unwrinkled, eager to hear what help or advice he could expect from me.

Covering his hands with mine, then lifting a shock of his blue-jay hair in a gesture of affection, I tried to comfort him. He would continue to be best friends with Mani and share interests with him, but at the same time, in a very delicate and amiable way, he should tell

him that he never felt any gayness in him and that later on in life, it is with a woman that he would wish to build a family and raise children. That he had the greatest respect for Mani and that, being so handsome and so bright, he would not have difficulties in finding his alter ego, among the thousands of boys in Tel Aviv, who were like him. That, in any case, his love and his friendship for him would remain untainted and unconditional. It is with an appeased and grateful mien that Ismael thanked me as he walked upstairs to rejoin his friend for the night.