Like his sisters, Aliza Rose and Hallel Ma’ayan, Adar Daniel Abramowitz-Silverman would have more syllables in his name than John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt. Names I wrapped around them like protective armor. He began transforming our lives from the moment we saw the first pictures of him.

At first, we knew him only as Daniel, the “paperwork name” they gave him when he arrived at the orphanage in Addis Ababa. We decided to call him Adar, a Hebrew name drawn from the Jewish calendar month in which our paperwork and his were stapled together. We held out this name for him, open and waiting like a warm fluffy towel at the seaside for a child running cold and blue-lipped from the waves.

Waiting for a glimpse of his face was torture. His picture was never on the adoption website because our match was made before his profile had been uploaded. It was eleven days and thirteen hours before the thick manila envelope arrived. It finally appeared in the mailbox the third time I checked that day, the fifty-fourth
time since I had perfected the ritual of slowly opening the mailbox while saying “please-please-please.” The sun was high in a pale blue sky and a chill hovered over our covered porch, but that’s not why I shivered as I stared at the return address label: African Cradle Children’s Center. I solemnly took the envelope to the dining room table and took a deep breath. It was the last moment of not knowing the face of my child.

The photos that spilled out on the table showed a round face with wide, focused eyes, and full red lips that my sister Laura would later describe as “little silk pillows.” He was lying on a baby bouncer, his head and upper body raised. He wore white one-piece pajamas with the outlines of butterflies, over which was a blue and white bib shaped like a dog’s face. His tiny bare feet poked out at the ends, their softness visible.

He was beautiful.

I savored each shot of my son like the first sip of coffee in the morning. “Aliza, Hallel and Adar,” I said, melding our children into one family.

“Wow. Wow, wow, wow,” was Yosef’s reaction when I brought the photos to his office. His small nonprofit of Jewish educational websites had grown to a staff of twelve, each of whom was equally excited for news from Ethiopia. Yosef held up one picture where Adar’s mouth made an O shape, eyes wide in amusement.

“I know,” I said, beaming. “It’s like he’s saying, ‘I am no mere subject for your camera. I am also looking at you.’”

We had waited until we had the physical proof to tell Aliza, five, and Hallel, three, about their new brother. I was itching for the evening ahead, our big plan for breaking the news to them: hiking to a beautiful setting, showing them the pictures and relishing their excitement. I hoped Yosef remembered to bring the video camera. What a moment it would be!
Late that afternoon, the girls and I met Yosef at Cold Spring Park. We would now and forever know this place as Adar Hill. “It was where I first saw your face and knew that my life was complete,” I imagined Aliza saying to a standing-room-only crowd at her brother’s future bar mitzvah. I could easily see that day: Aliza would be eighteen then, poised and articulate. Her hair would be brushed. Hallel would be sixteen, her eyes finally in sync with each other—not, as my sister Laura described, “so crossed it’s like they’re trying to switch sockets.” She will honor her Ethiopian brother’s Jewish rite of passage in a watercolor she had painted of Adar Hill.

Yosef and I did good ritual, and this plan was perfect. I was an ordained rabbi, and together we had written a Jewish parenting book. We had this stuff down. We would go up Adar Hill, where each of us in turn would offer the baby a blessing. I could already hear Aliza and Hallel's little voices in my head: May you get lots of kisses in Ethiopia. May you come home soon. May you have sweet dreams. “Girls, stop kissing the pictures so much!” I’d have to mock-scold them. Then we’d sing *shehecheyanu*, a blessing that thanks God for bringing us to a special moment. The girls would dance to our happy song.

The four of us ambled toward one of the small hills just off the trail. Dry and crusty leaves, liberated from months under ice and snow, crunched beneath our feet. Tiny green promises of spring on the tips of the tree branches broke through the barrenness. I patted my jacket pocket for the photos like a traveler feeling for her passport.

It was chilly but dry, and we were bundled in heavy sweaters. “It’s cold,” Aliza complained.

“Why are we here?” Hallel asked with an edge of complaint.

“You’ll see, sweetie,” I said in a perfect singsong, hoping my coyness wouldn’t send her into a fit of Hallel-rage that would
surely spoil the plan. Instead of the perfect ritual, Yosef would carry a kicking child to the van, Aliza would be relieved and I would be furious at everyone.

But fortunately, we quietly continued on. Our silent ascent, with only the sounds of our footsteps and the occasional snapping twig, made me think of our biblical father, Abraham, walking up a different mountain with his son, Isaac, on his way to heed God’s call to sacrifice the boy. Their walk was defined by a silence interrupted by only a single interaction. “Father,” Isaac said. “Here is the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God will provide the offering, my son.”

What kind of God would call parents to sacrifice their son? A distant, impervious, indifferent God. The same God, I imagined, that in stark silence had demanded as much from Adar’s birth mother, whose fate the adoption agency hadn’t known. The same God that had randomly granted us her child.

Abraham bound Isaac to an altar and held the knife in the air above him. An angel of God called out, “Abraham! Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy!” Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the brambles—the true sacrifice. Suddenly God was no longer an indifferent absence. God was the ability to stretch and transform reality—to save a child. This was an ability life’s circumstances had granted me, but had not granted my new son’s birth mother.

Upon our own little mountain, Aliza sat on Yosef’s lap, protected from the cold ground, and Hallel sat on mine, wiggling her tush to get comfortable. I breathed in Hallel’s hair and kissed her head, so grateful that I could hold my daughters, raise them, love them. That I would also be the mother of this new baby boy. Joggers and dog-walkers passed below us. *Hey, down there, want to see some pictures?*
“Girls, we have a surprise for you,” I said. “You have a new baby brother!”

“His name is Adar, and he’s a month old,” Yosef added.

I looked at the girls expectantly, smiling broadly to encourage the same from them.

Hallel spoke first. “Can we get pizza?” she said.

“Pizza!” agreed Aliza, jumping up. They both began running down the hill, bound for pizza.

“Wait!” I called. “We have pictures!” I waved them in the air like an evangelist with a pamphlet.

Our perfect moment had sucked. Yosef put his arm around me. “I’m sorry, honey. I know it didn’t go as you hoped,” he said.

“Self-centered little shits,” I said about my five- and three-year-olds.

That night, the wind whistling softly through the open window, tinkling the wooden box of chimes I had placed on the windowsill when we moved in, imagining the peaceful, quaint childhood the room would hold, Hallel cried out in her sleep. She tossed and turned, her face scrunched. A tear ran down one cheek.

“Mama’s here, sweetie girl, everything’s okay,” I whispered. Oh God, did something horrible happen to her? I scanned my mind for any unsavory staff working at her day care. Or maybe she was longing for, worried for, her baby brother?

“No, stop. Stop it!” she said.

“What’s the matter, baby?” I spoke gently, stroking her head.

More weepy tossing. Tell me, baby! What is it?

Finally she called out, loudly and clearly, “Stop copying me!”

Hallel did not take kindly to imitation. That would be her nightmare, even at age three, that others were copying her thoughtful, intricate drawings and paintings. No, she was not reliving a secret trauma, or longing for Adar. I laughed. This sweet
combination of surprise and familiarity deepened my tenderness toward her. As I kissed her forehead, I thought of my son, still a mystery, a continent away, far beyond my touch. I wondered if he awoke crying in the night. If his birth mother, if she were still alive, reached for him in her dreams.

By morning the girls seemed to have acclimated to the news and were even excited. They huddled over Adar’s pictures, laying them out on the table in order of their favorites, negotiating the relative merits of each. “He has big eyes,” Hallel said, comically widening her narrow green ones. “I think he’s talking here,” Aliza said, making her lips round like his and saying, “Oooohhh.”

Soon they were dancing around the table, scream-singing his name and waving the photos like flags. It was Lord of the Flies meets Barney. They pulled a picture of the two sisters off the refrigerator and placed their favorite Adar pic next to it. I was dispatched to our home office to make copies of the combined photos so they could show their friends and teachers the three siblings together. They had a brother!

On our way to New Hampshire to show my parents their new grandson, I ignored the exact change in the ashtray and chose a lane with a tollbooth attendant.

“Really, honey?” Yosef said as I reached into my pocketbook and pulled out a dollar and the pictures.

At my mom’s house, my four parents gathered to “meet” Adar—my dad and his wife, Janice; and my mom and her husband, John. My family doesn’t make distinctions among “step,” “half,” or, to some extent, “ex.” “Adopted” was certainly not going to be a defining category.

We met at Mom’s, where I made John a cup of coffee. I took pride in it because I was the only person who made the coffee strong enough for his taste. Also, he was so self-sufficient and quietly,
constantly helpful to us all that it brought me joy to do anything, even something small, for him. One fall Sunday as he was sweeping my back porch, I said, “John, why do you help us so much?” He paused, held the broom steady, and said, “Because it makes my life better.” I knew that this new baby grandson would make his life even better.

What a motley crew it was around the large, round kitchen table: my mother in her jeans and flannel button-down; John in his beige khakis and light-blue work shirt; Janice in her workout clothes, her white sneakers stark against her somehow still tanned legs, wearing the diamond ring her first husband gave her (“It’s a perfectly good ring, just ’cuz he was a schmuck”); and my dad in the official red Target employee shirt emblazoned with a white circle near the left shoulder that he managed to get through the employees’ website after Janice suggested he add some designer labels to his wardrobe, “for when we’re in Boca.” “Hey, this shirt has a label,” he had argued.

“It’s amazing,” my father said in his thick New Hampshire accent as he gazed at the pictures. “He’s a random kid on the other side of the world, and I love him already. I’d do anything for him. How can that be? It’s un-fuckin’-believable.”

“Oy, oy, oy, Susie! Is he eva gaw-jess!” said Janice. “He’s gonna be a real lady killa.”

“He’s mighty fine,” said John, always dignified and able to convey deep love with sparse words. Whenever I say, “I love you, John,” he replies, “And I you, my dear,” but it carries just as much oomph as my dad’s “Oy! Love ya to pieces, honey!”

An orphanage in eastern Africa immediately became an outpost of our home, a satellite location of our daily lives, as if Ethiopia were Adar’s bedroom, right next to the girls’ room. Talking about Adar, guessing what he might be like, choosing blankets and sheets
for him, imagining his—and therefore our—mythical ancestors, made Adar grow in our hearts from March to October, when I would travel to Addis Ababa and bring our son home.

The pictures thrust my mother into high gear. She began making a list of things to send Adar—vitamins, a mobile for his crib to increase his IQ, family pictures, clothing. Her grandson was going to have the best start in life he could; she would see to that. And maybe our busy, far-away tending would keep him safe.