

Of the Gadje and the Zigeuner

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Several chapters spoke to me on a deeply personal level; especially those on sons, schizophrenia, disability, and transgender children, because they echoed something raw and half-buried in my own past. As I read Solomon's stories of children suddenly seen as "wrong" by the people around them, I kept feeling myself pulled back into one sharp, unforgettable moment that set the tone for my childhood and adolescent years.

I remember the first day of grade one was kind of a small miracle. But that first day I spent the entire day side by side with a boy named Roel. We coloured at the same table, partnered up for games, shared quiet jokes that made us both giggle when the teacher's back was turned. It felt easy in a way that friendship rarely does when you're six, there was no effort, just a sense that I had finally found my place next to someone. By the final bell, I was certain I had found my person for the year. I walked home floating, replaying the day and imagining all the days that would follow, carrying that fragile, glowing certainty like something precious in my chest.

The next morning, I arrived at school already smiling, scanning the playground for him. When I finally spotted Roel across the yard, a rush of relief and happiness went through me. I raised my hand and waved as hard as I could, my whole body leaning into that gesture. But the moment his eyes met mine, something inside me tightened. His face was different, closed, guarded, as if a door had quietly swung shut overnight and I was standing on the wrong side. The lightness I'd felt the day before evaporated. He looked straight at me, held my gaze for a second that felt much too long, and then turned away. Without a word, he walked toward another group of kids and slipped into their circle as if I had never existed.

I told myself there had to be some mistake. Maybe he didn't recognize me from far away, maybe he was shy in front of the others, maybe if I just went over everything would snap back

into place. Clinging to that hope, I crossed the playground and reached out, tapping him lightly on the shoulder the way I had the day before. He flinched as if my touch burned him. In one quick, practiced motion, he spun around and his fist connected squarely with my face.

For a moment, all I could register was impact, white heat, the taste of metal in my mouth, the sudden blur of sky and gravel as my eyes filled with tears. But even before the pain fully registered, the words reached me. Under his breath, close enough that only I could hear, he spat out “zigeuner kind”. I felt it like a stain being pressed onto me. It was there in his voice; disgust, contempt, a desire to make sure I understood that whatever I was, I was not welcome.

Standing there with my face burning and my eyes stinging, I felt something inside me crack. The boy who had laughed with me all day yesterday had decided, sometime between afternoon dismissal and the next morning’s bell, that I was not his friend but his target. Affection hadn’t just cooled; it had hardened into something sharp and punishing. In a single, unannounced moment, I was recategorized, from friend to stranger, from equal to “other” to foe that needed to be pushed away. He was gadje, I was Romani.

That is the feeling that rose up and up again as I read *Far from the Tree*. When Solomon writes about sons with schizophrenia whose parents suddenly speak of them as if they are no longer the same person, I recognized that instant of being quietly redefined without your consent. When he described disabled and transgender children being met with fear or revulsion instead of care, I heard the echo of that whispered slur, that small, private verdict that says: you are not one of us, you are something else. My childhood moment was not brief, this playground incident was the catalyst of years of torment, but reading Solomon made me realize it was a smaller version of the larger, ongoing violence of being told your existence itself is a problem. That is why those chapters didn’t just interest me; they hurt, and in hurting, they made me feel seen.

Terminology

Zigeuner: in Flemish/Dutch is an exonym and a form of a wider European slur (often rendered in English as gypsy) that non-Romani people have used for Romani and Traveller communities.

As an exonym, it carries connotations of criminality, otherness, and dirtiness and anchoring anti-Romani laws, segregation, police surveillance, and even mass violence against Roma; for that reason, it should be seen as a racial insult rather than a neutral label.

Kind: in Flemish/Dutch and German means child.

Gadje: is a Romani word used to refer to non-Romani people, roughly meaning “outsiders”.