

Shalom Auslander - Plagued

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PLAGUED

And the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt. And one chose to stay behind

BY SHALOM AUSLANDER

Come on in here, Seth," called Mr. Omonratop. "We need to talk."

Omonratop was my boss, a middle-aged man of wealth, responsibility, and the insincere yet irresistible charm common to captains of industry, heads of state, and leaders of religions. I was a young craftsman in a large southern Egyptian craftsman company with offices in twenty-two districts around the empire. A glamour field. Only scribes got more pussy. Omonratop drove the latest chariot on the market. This was what he'd had etched on the rear bumper: "Craftsmen do it with anyone they want." And it was true. Money, women, chariots. Bling bling. I was blessed.

He was standing at the window when I entered his office, hands behind his back. He faced the courtyard as he spoke.

"Need some extra hands on the Ramses job," said Omonratop. "The tomb."

A Pharaonic tomb. I was only twenty-five. Nobody under forty ever worked on a Pharaonic tomb.

"Are you serious?" I asked.

Omonratop turned to face me.

"Are you?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

"You're not leaving?"

"Sir?"

He walked toward me, put his hands on my shoulders.

"This is a long-term project, Seth. I need someone who'll be here for the duration."

Goddamned Moses.

"I heard him say he's taking his people with him," said Omonratop.

"I'm not his people, sir."

"You're an Israelite."

"I'm an Egyptian."

Omonratop nodded.

"It's the main burial chamber," he said, putting an arm around my shoulder. "Guy named Ramen's running the

show in there, you'll answer to him. Bring your own water, though, it's hot as hell in there by ten in the morning...."

Nuit came for dinner. My Egyptian princess. My non-Yiddishe Mama. I'd loved her since we were children, running shoeless through our village, and then, once we'd grown older, swimming topless in the Nile. Black hair, light eyes, and golden skin. A laugh like Isis herself, and an ass like a pair of Gizan pyramids.

Mother brought the bread to the table; I brought the corn and news of my promotion.

"You're not going to accept it, are you?" Mother asked.

"A Pharaonic tomb job? No, why would I accept that?"

"But we're leaving," said Mother.

"We're not leaving."

"Leaving to where?" asked Nuit.

"Nowhere. Ma, for God's sake, would you stop worrying Nu?"

"To a Promised Land," said Mother. "With Moses."

Nuit looked to me with concern.

"Fine, Ma, go ahead. Tell Nuit about your Promised Land."

"It's the land the Lord promised us," said Mother. "The Israelites, I mean. The land he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I'm sure you could come along, though. Maybe not. Probably not. Maybe you could come later. I don't know. And it's flowing," she added. "With, you know, milk and honey."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"The Promised Land. Where is it?"

"It's ... wherever. Somewhere. God will show us."

"Got maps, does He?"

"I heard something about Canaan," said Mother.

I laughed.

"What's wrong with Canaan?" asked Mother.

"It's a pit."

Mother gasped.

"How can you say that?"

"Because I've seen it, Ma, the summer I worked in the quarries. They sent us down there to get rocks. That's all it is. It's a pile of rocks. You're going to trade Thebes for that?"

"You know what you are?" asked Mother as she took her plate and headed out the door. "You're a self-hating Israelite."

"I'm a self-loving Egyptian," I called after her.

Nuit stared down at her food.

"I'm not leaving," I said.

She nodded.

Goddamned Moses.

Later that night, there was a knock on the door. Nuit and I went to answer it. It was our old friend Khatum. There was blood on his hands.

"What happened?" Nuit asked.

Khatum shrugged, looking at his hands as though they weren't his own.

"I was just washing up," he said.

I brought Khatum a bowl and some water so he could clean himself off. The moment his hands touched the water, the water turned to blood.

Nuit gasped.

"How'd you do that?" I asked.

Khatum shrugged and handed me the bowl. The moment I took it from him, the blood turned back to water.

"How'd you do that?" Khatum asked.

I shrugged.

"By this you will know that I am the Lord," Mother said.

She stood in the doorway to her bedroom, hair wild, doing her very best Moses: one hand on the doorpost, one hand raised in the air. "With the staff that is in my hand," she declared, *"I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood."*

"Ma," I said.

"It's a miracle," said Mother, pointing to the bowl of water.

I winced. Miracles? This was the New Kingdom. Religion wasn't what it used to be. The Pharaoh wasn't God anymore; God wasn't God anymore. This bothered the believers, of course, but everyone else seemed to be enjoying the break. Ra was still Ra and Ptah was still Ptah, but miracles? Miracles were strictly Old Kingdom.

"It's just a trick," I said to Nuit. "Hocus-pocus."

"Make the girl do it," said Mother, pointing an accusing finger at Nuit.

"The girl?" I asked.

Nuit warily dipped her hand into the water, and the water turned to blood.

"Hell of a trick," said Khatum.

"I saw a guy in Thebes do it once," I lied. "With chocolate milk. Kids run up, touch a jug of water, bam, chocolate milk. Bush league."

"He should do parties," said Khatum.

"He does do parties. Moses does parties, right, Ma?"

Nuit sat quietly wiping the blood from her fingers.

"By this you will know that I am the Lord," Mother said again, and she turned sharply and went to bed. Later, Nuit, Khatum, and I climbed up to the roof with a few jugs of wine, and we spent the evening turning water into blood and blood into water. Khatum ruined one jug of wine by accidentally touching it; I turned it back to wine, but nobody wanted to drink it. After that, I would hold the bottle and pour the wine directly into their mouths.

"No touching," I said. "For thou hast cooties."

"See?" giggled Nuit, "you are a slave."

"I'm your slave," I said, nuzzling her neck.

Khatum clapped his hands.

"Israelite! More wine!"

He opened his mouth and threw his head back, awaiting my service. Nuit laughed. For a moment it seemed as if we were children again, in the times before gods and politics.

It had been a while since we'd seen Khatum. It had never been a secret that he'd always loved Nuit, and it had never been a secret that she'd always loved me. He'd accepted it long ago, but perhaps our recent talk of marriage was more than he could bear. Perhaps he always thought his story would end with her in his arms. But then he also thought his story would end with his becoming a craftsman like his father; these days, though, he worked in the quarries, digging up stones for craftsmen like me. You can hope all you want for a happy ending, but sometimes, like it or not, the guy writing your story is working on a tragedy; you may not even be the main character. I felt bad for Khatum. Egypt was going through a recession. Competition for jobs was fierce, and for many, the famous Egyptian Dream — a house, twelve-point-three kids, and a two-chariot garage — would never come to pass. And so, like many of our generation, Khatum had responded with cynicism and anger, and he had taken to blaming others, sometimes loudly, and always after a few mugs of wine, for his own failures and dissatisfaction. And he was now a few past a few mugs of wine.

"Filthy Israelite!" Khatum shouted. "Unhand that Egyptian princess! Taketh thy dirty Semitic arm from ... from around my beloved's ... from her loins, you dirty ..."

Nuit stood. "It's getting late," she said.

I helped Khatum to his feet.

"Maybe," he said as we helped him down the stairs.

We helped him on with his jacket and led him to the front door.

"Maybe," he said again.

"Will you be all right getting home?" asked Nuit.

Khatum poked a finger in my chest. "Maybe you should get the hell out," he said. "Maybe you should all get the hell out."

Goddamned Moses.

Nobody seemed all that impressed with the whole frog thing; magicians had been making bunnies pop out of hats for ages. Cleanup was a bitch, sure, the dead frogs reeked, and the usual environmental groups camped outside Moses' house to protest the slaughter of innocent amphibians, but for the most part, in the press and on the street, the whole event was met by the Egyptian people with a collective unawe-inspired, non-dumbstruck "Seen it."

And then came the lice.

They were everywhere, swarms of them. In people's houses, in their food, in their hair. Businesses closed, and with the economy already depressed, store owners could ill afford the loss of revenue. Men shaved the hair off their animals. Women shaved the hair off their heads.

"It's a trick," I said to Nuit. "Hocus-pocus."

"It's not a trick," announced the Pharaoh's own magicians. "It's a miracle."

Now they decide to talk.

The situation at work had become tense.

"What's the point?" my furious coworkers asked me, as if I were doing the tricks — plagues, whatever — all by myself. "Do you really think this is the way to get anyone to listen," they asked. "I mean, do you?"

I didn't.

Lunch tables cleared when I sat down. Conversations ground to a halt when I walked by. I spent most of the day in my office, or hiding in the bathroom.

"Israelites out!" someone had written on the wall of the men's room. "Moses sucks cock."

OK, I wrote that last one. It pleased me to imagine a world thousands of years hence, where all they knew of this Egyptian empire they had gleaned from the discovery of one small stone etched with the hieroglyph "Moses sucks cock." I imagined my famous Tablet of Thebes on display in a museum where people would come from kilometers around to view it for themselves. "We know very little about this Moses," the tour guide would say thoughtfully, "but we do know that he sucked."

"They're just angry," said Nuit over dinner.

I nodded.

"Stop staring at my skull," she said.

She had shaved it when the lice hit. That beautiful black hair; I was taking it harder than she.

"Sorry," I said. "You look like the Sphinx."

"The Sphinx?"

"Sorry."

"The Sphinx isn't bald," said Nuit.

"She's not?"

"He."

"It's a he?"

"I think so."

Boy, they'd really rushed the head on that thing.

"A bald he," I said.

"Fine," she said, leaning forward to kiss me. "You always said you wanted to work inside the Sphinx."

She nibbled my ear.

"I'll get my chisels," I said.

"Ooo," she said. "Kinky."

By the time the last of the wild beasts had been rounded up and slaughtered, the anger that rumbled through our empire during the lice had swirled into a tempest of hatred and violence. The beasts had killed Egyptian livestock, ruined scores of houses, and injured more people than the doctors could heal. News reports told of people lying on the ground outside hospitals, waiting for treatment, many of them dying without being seen.

I went to work, hoping for some degree of normalcy. But the writing, once again, was on the bathroom wall. It said, "Kill the Israelites."

"Come on in here, Seth," called Mr. Omonratop. "We need to talk."

I told him that my office had been trashed.

"Yeah," said Mr. Omonratop, "sorry about that. Just the boys letting off a little steam. Healthy. You don't want to keep that anger all pent up."

I nodded.

"You know I think the world of you, son," he said. "I hate to see you go."

I nodded.

"But it's a chemistry thing. We're a team here. And, well, there's no I in team."

"But there's two in *Israelite*," I said.

"Exactly," he said. "So you see my point."

I nodded.

Goddamned anti-Israelites.

Long before the beasts, long before the blood, it had been something of a sport among the empire's minorities to claim genealogical ownership of the adopted Prince Moses. The Israelites claimed he was Israelite, the Nubians claimed he was Nubian, and the Hyksos claimed he was Hyksos. They were all clamoring for that coveted foot in the palace door, a foot they believed spoke of legitimacy and acceptance. As far as the majority was concerned, though, any immigrant foot in the palace door only spoke to the need for a heavier door, stronger locks, maybe a dead bolt.

Things got worse a couple of years ago, after Moses murdered an Egyptian soldier and fled into the desert. The nation called for blood, and the press answered that call. The pampered prince and his legendary lisp would no longer be protected. THOLDIER THLAYER FLEETH! the headlines shouted. TO THE DETHERT, THORTHETH THAY! Moses claimed it was self-defense, which nobody believed (soldiers didn't tend to attack royals), and it was only a matter of days before the groups who'd been proudly claiming Moses were busy unclaiming him as publicly as possible: Israelites claimed he was Nubian, Nubians claimed he was Hyksos, and the Hyksos claimed he was Israelite. "Lousy Israelites run this country," they had said, "everyone knows that."

Despite the speculation, his true lineage only became clear a few months later when Moses returned from the desert, marched into the palace unannounced, and began accusing the new Pharaoh of wrongful imprisonment and crimes against humanity. It would have been bigger news had a day gone by without someone marching into the palace and accusing the Pharaoh of crimes against humanity, but the big story here was, as the paper reported it, that as Prince Moses finished his little speech, he held his fist in the air, threw his head back, and shouted, "Let my people go!"

A hush had fallen over the room.

"Riiiiight," the Pharaoh had answered, curious as the rest of his empire. "Your people. And, uh, pardon my asking, but which people would that be, then? Wouldn't want to set the wrong people free...."

"The Ithraelith," Moses had answered.

"Who?"

"The Ithraelith!"

The Pharaoh shook his head.

"I thed the Ithraelith! Thit. Thun of a bitth ith thtone deaf."

"Oh," Pharaoh had said. "The Israelites."

The morning papers were all over it.

THOLDIER THLAYER RETURNTH; THEEKTH TO THET ITHREALITE THLAVETH FREE!

Two months later, I was out of a job, carrying a knife in my pocket wherever I went, and scrubbing "All Israelites must die" off the front wall of my house.

The pestilence was brutal. All of the livestock in Egypt were dead. Horses, donkeys, camels, cattle. When the Nile had turned to blood, it killed all the fish, and the poor, for whom fish was a staple, had gone terribly hungry. Now, with the livestock wiped out, the wealthy would go hungry, too.

"How egalitarian," Khatum might have said, were he still speaking to me. "For a God, I mean."

It was no longer safe to go out, not at night, not for anyone, but especially not for Israelites. Gangs of Egyptian youths had been attacking elderly Israelites and defacing Israelite cemeteries. One night, hundreds

of them marched through the streets, setting fire to Israelite shops and overturning Israelite chariots. I had been out to dinner with Nuit that evening. On our way home, we passed Khatum, who was setting fire to a pile of Israelite books.

“Nothing personal,” he said to me, glancing at Nuit with disgust. “You’d better get her home.”

We hurried down the street. We hadn’t gone far when two youths blocked our way. I reached for Nuit’s hand. The taller of the two stepped forward and sniffed the air beside her head.

“Israelite-lover,” he spat at her.

I pulled the knife from my pocket. Fearless, he stepped even closer.

“Not them,” Khatum called from down the street.

The youths shot him an angry look.

“I said not them!”

The youths backed away.

“Get her home,” Khatum shouted.

We began to pass, and as we did, the taller one leaned forward and spat on the ground beside Nuit’s feet.

“Get her *home*!”

There,” Mother said, handing us each a cup of tea, “now you see the true nature of the Egyptian.”

I didn’t know what I saw. I saw people behaving like beasts. I saw God behaving like a thug. Was this a plague, too? Was this *our* plague, the plague upon the Israelites, the plague of being hated? Had the plagues caused this hatred, as Nuit had said, or had the plagues simply exposed it, as Mother had said? Wasn’t even this – this endless wondering, this theological paranoia – a plague? Maybe Khatum had been right. Maybe it was time to go. Maybe my Egypt was gone. Maybe it had never existed.

The Israelite Defense Force met once a week, and never in the same place twice. They’d heard about the knife incident, and asked me to attend their next fundraiser.

“This is not about Moses!” a man exhorted the group gathered before him, who nodded along in agreement as he spoke. “This is about self-defense! This is about an eye for an eye! The Israelites didn’t land on the pyramids of Giza; the pyramids of Giza landed on us. Are you with me?”

I didn’t know.

Nuit was starving, just like the rest of them. “Them.” The pronoun all wars have in common.

We sat together on the roof of my hut, she and I, and I tried to feed her some of our meat. In just a few short days, the pestilence had killed almost all of the Egyptians’ animals. The Israelites’ animals were untouched.

Nuit’s food wouldn’t stay down. She would chew it and try swallowing, but the plague was too crafty. She moaned and I held her. Her limbs felt like reeds, hard and brittle. When the Nile was low, I would collect reeds

from along the edge of the river and carve them into flutes, and I would play music for Nuit. She would lie to me and say it was good. The boils were on her shoulders now. A few showed on her forehead, another few on her chin. Sometimes she would grab the flute from my hands and run to the river, and I would chase her, and lift her into my arms, and then she would shout for me to put her down and when I did she would push me into the water, and I would reach for her and pull her in with me, and afterward we would lie together naked on the banks of the river, and we'd hold hands, or I'd play some more music, and then we'd both fall asleep under a peaceful sun.

Another night of violence had begun. From the rooftop I could see that a fire had broken out across the street. An old woman screamed.

We were going to be married.

Big promotion at work.

Pharaoh's tomb.

My Egyptian princess.

"And by this," Moses had said, "you shall know He is the Lord."

Mother was packing.

"It gets cool in the desert at night, doesn't it?" she asked. "Are you taking a jacket?"

"I don't know."

The hail was bouncing heavily off the roof.

"I wonder if they'll have makeup there in the Promised Land – I'd hate to carry all this with me. Do you have room in your bag?"

"I don't know."

Nuit was dying. The boils had erupted, and as they wept, they became septic and putrid, and her body, too malnourished to fight, surrendered. I tried to make her comfortable, whispered to her about the Egyptian afterlife, where the two halves of her spirit would be reunited, and she would become a member of the starry night sky and she would be free to roam on and over the earth, and how on one bright perfect Egyptian day she would come find me and I would chase her down to the Nile and she would push me in, and I would grab and pull her in with me, and afterward the banks, and the flute, and the holding hands and the peaceful sun .

...

And then the lights went out, and the Darkness fell, and when it lifted, three days later, Mother was packed and Nuit was dead.

Everyone here is dead. Even the living are dead.

Mother is gone. She is following a madman into the desert, a madman who is following a murderer. Last night, in my village alone, He murdered hundreds of us in our sleep.

I'm sorry, I said to everyone. To anyone.

Just go, they said.

And *Rejoice*, said the madman, *let this day be a day of celebration for your children and your children's children and your ...*

We chased him then, all of us, Israelite and Egyptian alike. With sticks and with swords we chased him, until the soldiers came with chariots and camels and they took up the hunt.

And on that very day, Moses wrote in his account of the story, *the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions.*

I think he meant "balls." These were the options my God had left me: head out to the desert and take my chances with Him, or stay behind in Egypt with a nation who would like to kill me themselves.

I have remained behind with the dead. They might kill me tonight. They might kill me tomorrow. They were my brothers. They were my friends. Maybe someday I'll find somewhere new. Somewhere without gods or pharaohs, without princes or plagues. No Ra, no Ptah, no Asur. No Yahweh, no El, no nothin'.

What could I have done? I plead with my neighbors. *I'm not His people. He's not my God.*

God. That was the real surprise. This was the New Kingdom, after all — a place known for its godlessness. But behold, a new God had arisen over Egypt, and there it was — in the firstborns slumped over tables, in the children dead in their sleep, in all the beloveds facedown in the street, cold, bloated, blue — the glorious evidence His believers had so anxiously been awaiting.

Puddles of piss. Blood of innocents. God of Abraham.

I hear Greece is nice.