

...In a Strange Land

John J. Clayton

SOMETIMES I DREAM OF A TIME BEFORE MY TIME, before my wife, before my children, before my father Moses and our escape from slavery into the wilderness. I dream back, back, into terrible waters drowning giant, golden, wicked ancestors — along with a riffraff of camels and bats and mastodons. An underwater ballet of despair below a triumphant ark.

Two arks: ark of survival, ark of the covenant. Our peculiar triumph.

Which must have been *my* triumph, because after all, here I am, shlepping through this desert with a cranky wife. Somehow in my genes must be the genes of Noah and of Noah's wife, the one who goes unnamed. That's all she is, a missus, the shipbuilder's wife. But she must have been really something, splendid I mean, something splendid — ancestress to the chosen, chosen by God, those wrestlers, con men, court Jews. Not to mention my father, Moses, and the big shot geniuses of our future — King David, who will write all those psalms and sleep with all those women...though not so many women as his son Solomon. And I can foresee the girls and boys long in our future, boys and girls with brains. Not kings, just smart. Golda Meir, Albert Einstein.

Though maybe the reason Noah's wife isn't named is that all she did was kvetch — how stupid her husband was, building a ship on dry land! I'll tell you frankly, but keep it under your hat, that's what my wife would have done. You haven't anything better to do with your time? she'd say. Gershom, she'd say, What kind of hobby you picked for yourself? Since we had that little episode, making a stupid calf-god out of gold jewelry, she hasn't stopped criticizing. *Moo, moo*, she growls under her breath when we pass each other by the tent.

What are you commenting on this time? I ask, blocking her way. It's not enough that I've disappointed my father?

She says, A calf! Why not a jackal like back in Egypt? How about a snake god like our good friends among the nations? Next what'll it be — the burning of children?

God forbid! We got rid of such a possibility with Isaac. I didn't say to her, to my Chava, that deep in my bones I hear the echo of that voice calling the father of the father of my father's father. I hear Abraham answer: *Hineni*. Here I am. Me, I would have hidden. Hidden from myself. I don't trust voices. That voice, sure as you're born, was the voice of the fathers, voice of what a Jew I can imagine (my useless gift) thousands of years hence will call the "punitive superego." Sometimes I wonder about all my father hears. Don't try to tell me different in the case of Isaac: the Voice of the Holy One doesn't enter till Act III, at: *Do not lay your hand upon the boy*.

That's where compassion enters the picture, and the story continues with a ram. Good for a sacrifice, the poor thing, good for a shofar. The ram wasn't so pleased. Without the Voice our story would have ended on that rocky slaughter-site. No Isaac, then no Jacob; no Jacob, no Joseph; no Joseph, then no Egypt; no slaving, no redemption. No Moses and the people Israel. No covenant and no ark to place it in, no tabernacle to construct along very precise lines — precise if you happen to know what a cubit measures. God the architect, Noah and Bezalel the builders.

No voice of my dear wife, tired of manna, tired of the long, hot trek with no sunscreen, then so cold in the night you have to wrap yourself in your caftan and huddle together in the tent. And huddled this way, the five of us, like overlapping spoons, she whispers in my ear, so as not to wake the children, How many gods do we have? So why is it so hard to listen? Would it have been so terrible to have waited for Moses to come down from the mountain?

As we follow the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night.

As we collect manna or shmooze or listen to Moses and Aaron.

As we sit in our tents in the heat of the day, sometimes a few days, sometimes months.

Or Miriam sings and leads the women in song (not Chava, who sings like a crow)...

I think always of my children, who will survive to live in the Promised Land. *We* won't. It's something I know. The other day men were sent to scout

the land. They came back terrified, with tales of giants we can't defeat. Then Moses told us that God had lost patience. So part of our army decided stupidly to attack on its own — but God had left us; we were defeated.

Now Moses tells us that God will keep this whining, faithless, slave generation from entering the Land. I always feared we'd fail to live up to their demands. There's entirely too much demand and expectation in the *midbar* [wilderness]. Now I know for certain: our bones will be buried in the desert.

This really is not so bad with me. I'm knocked out plenty from the escape and the journey. I pray only for my children, our children, that they go on to the Holy Land to plant orchards of fruit trees and olive trees, fig trees and grape vines. That they marry and beget, and the begetters beget, and the begotten invent houses of study and yeshivas and universities for more study and synagogues, where we can praise God and complain about the rabbi. Synagogues don't exist, but they're an invention we'll need when we scatter, as we surely will, and the Temple is gone.

Here on the journey, of course, we're on God's welfare checks,
collecting manna and drinking from rocks.

There was a time before becoming snarled in Egypt when we weren't tribe upon tribe, each with its ordained place in the camp. All we were was one single man, Jacob, asleep in a rocky wilderness, a stone beneath his head. All of us are a little that Jacob. We dream — not of angels climbing steps to heaven but of puzzling journeys in which, at each stage, we become more lost. We can't find our way. We see no angels. And God rarely seems to be in this place. Yet we all have Jacob inside. We all make promises to the Holy One. We all long for God's voice.

We have learned from Jacob how to make a living. From Jacob and from Joseph his son. I see ahead of us the profession of court Jew, who will serve power and grow rich and be resented by the peasantry. Here on the journey, of course, we're on God's welfare checks, collecting manna and drinking from rocks. In Egypt we made no *living*; our work was a little more of dying each day. But soon, like Jacob and Joseph, my children and my children's children will need to work — perhaps for some noble house or crooked uncle try-

ing to scam them. But maybe, like Jacob, they'll scam him. By the sweat of their brow they will become the ancestors of the men of the Great Assembly, of holy rabbis torn apart by big shots from Rome, ancestors of the scholars and poets of our future. I believe in us, I believe in that future of ours, though I happen to know how we'll suffer.

What else is new? Eden is the other way and angels guard the gates.


Chava tells me, You, Gershom. You are, after all, Moses's son. You claim to have a gift of prophecy. Why is it only your uncle Aaron's sons who will become high priest? Get close to your father. You can become a *macher*, a big deal.

Not me. I don't want to be a big deal. My name — Gershom — is my fate. *A stranger there, a stranger in a strange land*. I was born at the wadi of my grandfather Jethro and circumcised on the way to Egypt. I became part of our people, but always known as an outsider. Later, my mother and I returned to her father. When we came back to Moses, he greeted my grandfather but paid no attention to us. I'm still a stranger. Yet God knows I believe, with a few qualifications, in Moses' teaching. I try to do God's bidding as Moses reveals it.

My job now is to help build the *mishkan* [Tabernacle] under the direction of Bezalel. I'm good at what I do, hammering gold into the shape of sockets, linking posts and beams into the sockets. The tolerances are tiny. It's a structure that needs to be taken apart, carried to the next encampment, put together. But at times I have secret longings: to study this new teaching, this Torah I see Moses and a few others discussing and discussing. Now that would be something.

Because I have questions. The Torah gives us instruction; Moses interprets. This is some guy, Moses, some papa, but sometimes I think up a different interpretation. For instance, we're told to slaughter the Canaanites, the Jebusites. Whose voice is doing the telling — is it really God? Or is Moses mistaken, as Abraham was? Whose voice is it telling us to proscribe a town?

My wife says, You heard, dummy. It says what it says.

But maybe, I say, maybe the thing we need to get rid of is inside us. What we need to wipe out. Frankly I can do without destroying a town and killing the inhabitants. If God can promise not to destroy the world, can't we imitate this side of God and figure so  other way?

The problem with you, Chava says, is you don't listen. Forty days and

forty nights, and you were already ready to party.

Party! You don't get it, I say to my wife. So please, *you tell me* — how are you supposed to survive — I don't mean in the flesh but in the spirit — survive *inside*, as a person, as a community, after forty days and forty nights? How much longer could we bear it? Moses gone, and we're in the midbar, desert all around, and day after day we watch the mountain for signs of his return. Here in the midbar, you look one way, it's rock and desert; you look another, the same. Except the little mountain, sometimes covered with smoke and fire. And that terrified us. But you know, all the rest — undifferentiated desert — that terrified us even more. It's like the *tohu va-vohu* before God separated water from water, earth from sky. We didn't know which way to turn. Every which way is toward emptiness, nothingness. After that, Egypt can look pretty good.

You could say we wanted to change
Pharaoh for Moses, that's all.
For this, I'm ashamed.

I don't want to make excuses. But I ask you, my listener: put yourself in our sandals. We're told by the Levites that God led us from Mitzrayim. Personally, I can't say. We saw the pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire. So something led us. What I do know is *Moses* led us. There were ten Words. Or...so Moses says. We were terrified — I know that — the thunder and the lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking. We said, "Let God not speak to us, lest we die. We said, "We will do and we will listen." To *Moses*, we said these things. In a way, Moses was already our icon. In a way it was Moses we worshipped, not God. It was Moses we wanted to replace with an object of worship. I admit it: in our hearts we'd never left Egypt, never left slavery. You could say we wanted to change Pharaoh for Moses, that's all.

For this, I'm ashamed.

But then he left us to ourselves, and at the center of the self of a slave, what is there? There's nothing. I longed for him — not God but Moses — to fill the emptiness in me. Me as son, me as Israelite. I longed for the meaning he brought. No — not the meaning: the *shining*. That's what we all

longed for. We longed for the radiance.

My wife is more ashamed of what we did. She says, You pretend it was a mistake. You pretend you meant to serve God and did so the wrong way. But you know what I think? she says, sticking up a lecturing forefinger. I think you were engaging in sabotage. My wife knows all about psychological dynamics. Gershom, she says, it's like with two lovers. You know as well as I do, sometimes lovers get so close that the closeness scares them, and they do something accidentally-on-purpose to destroy the relationship. That's the way it is with the people Israel and Moses. What is this nonsense? she says. You knew perfectly well what God said: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them." Please! she says. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know you were acting-out. At the moment of perfect union, such a smash-up! You were angry and scared. You were trying to destroy your relationship to God.

You may be partly right, I tell her. It's not safe losing ground in an argument with my wife. But you know what? It's more like a lover leaving you, abandoning you, and you get so mad you smash her clay pots, you toss her designer caftans out of the tent into the sand. I'll give you that it wasn't just a mistake. Okay? I'll give you that. But what did we know from God? We knew what Moses told us. Then he left us alone. We're like infants left by their mother. It made us crazy. So we said to ourselves, if we can't have Moses and God, we'll have to make a god out of our own substance. The best we could do was a calf.

Because how much substance do slaves have? We knew what a joke that was. A calf — like in Egypt. Oh, even a little calf is better than utter nothing. Maybe we wanted the sureties of Egypt, the concreteness of Egypt. The sensuality of Egypt, okay? Instead of a god we can't see? What we saw was Moses. When he was around, he stood in for God. He made the glory safe, made the journey bearable. But without Moses? Pure emptiness. And you know — maybe it was also pure spite.

Hmph, says my wife, narrowing those eyes of hers. An orgy has other satisfactions.

What orgy? A little dancing? All right — a rave.

It's sin, pure and simple, she says. In fact, she says, getting all intellec-

tual on me, raising her teaching forefinger, it's going to become the paradigm for sin.

I thought what happened in the garden was that, I tell her.

Both. Don't get smart. I know you can often see what's going to happen. Let *me* prophesy a little, she says. When we get to the Promised Land, she says, our stiff-necked descendants will become idol-worshippers. They'll fall, a leader of truth will come and purify their lives, and God will return. Then they'll fall again, the dummies. Worshipping the golden calf — this will be the paradigm of idolatry and faithlessness. Listen! No wonder Moses smashed the tablets.

Funny you mention the smashing. Now, *that* bothers me, I tell my wife. You listen. God tells him what's happening down here, and to hurry back to us. Answer me this: why would God tell him to hurry back to us and then threaten to destroy us? It doesn't hold up. So maybe God *wanted* Moses to beg forgiveness for us. Maybe God *wanted* Moses to remember the patriarchs, to remember we're only human. So he does. Moses begs forgiveness for us. But if he begs forgiveness for us, why come down the mountain and become so enraged that he smashes the tablets? The very guy who brought us Torah? To destroy Torah? Pretty ironic if you ask me.

I grant you ironic, says my wife. But it was all that dancing and singing. Not to mention what else he probably saw.

Nu? So when he came down, what did he think was going on? Group therapy? Why get so furious all of a sudden, right after defending us? You know what I think? Moses began to forget he was a human being and acted the role of God.

You don't know what you're talking about, my wife says. You sound like that what's-his-name, that Korach, stirring up people against Moses. Moses is the most humble man.

Humble? I think he became the angry, lawgiving God that day. And don't get me started on Korach — that set-up with the fire pans. Then suddenly the earth opens up to swallow the rebels. That was God's doing, not Moses', but couldn't you see my father's satisfaction? Listen, I say to my wife, we're not supposed to worship icons. But isn't Moses making himself into an icon?

Only if you treat him that way because you're afraid to live without icons, she said.

There's something to what you say. In fact, I tell her, I said it first. But

then why this lawgiving? This judgment? God kills with a plague, Moses with a sword. And grinding up the idol and making us drink the gold dust — what was that about? Ych! Anyway, if he wants to be like God, why can't he imitate God's compassion? Honey? It bothers me, all this righteousness. All this gearing up for destroying cities. After all, the Jebusites, the Canaanites, they're people, like us. It's taking the anger against ourselves, our own sins, and laying it on other people. In a few years, I happen to know, a smart Jew named Freud will label that *projection*. Very dangerous. We should stick to dumping on sacrificial animals.

It bothers me, all this righteousness.

All this gearing up for destroying cities.

Don't get me wrong. Demanding and authoritarian he may be, bringing us the *Devarim* — the Commandments, the Words. But can I help loving the guy? I can imagine you've been saying to yourselves — Aha! Gershom is dealing with an Oedipal conflict. Let me tell you, that Freud fellow will take his models from a different part of the Mediterranean, and from what he'll write about Moses, it's as if *he* were Moses' son. I mean it's *his* neurotic problem. Me, I am not struggling against my papa. Sometimes...sometimes, it's true, I wish he were more an ordinary father to me. But after all, he has to be father and teacher of us all. I know what we owe him.

My father, my teacher. *Moyshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our teacher. I like to walk at evening near his tent and feel the emanations. Whew. There's a field of holy energy there — the closer, the stronger. You can put out your fingers and touch it.

My favorite image of Moses is not of his standing at the Sea of Reeds, all muscles, like Charlton Heston, arm upraised; and it's not of his coming down from the mountain that second time lugging the two heavy stone tablets. As I work on the tabernacle, especially the holy place for the tablets with the Ten Words, in mind's eye I see my father Moses weeping to God in the cloud of light at the tent, begging for Miriam my aunt to be released from her punishment for bad-mouthing Moses — her skin turned white, leprous. Heal her, please heal her. I could hardly look at him — the radiance of the man! Like exposing your eyes to acetylene without darkened glass.

Sometimes my father is sitting out in front of his tent when the sun

goes down, sitting alone. How alone, how alone he is. I want to comfort. Sometimes I think that with all his responsibilities, he's forgotten his own family.

I sit on the ground beside him — a couple of balding men, he with an explosion of white beard, my beard black, but the black graying. He nods in recognition. Which is something. He's been talking all day. He hacks a cough. Even his cough has power. I love the guy. I don't want to bother him. He sighs, I sigh, he sighs. My grandfather, I say, he taught you how to lighten your work load — to appoint leaders of hundreds, leaders of thousands — not do all the work yourself. But they come to you anyway. You judge, you rule, you lead. You must feel as if you're lugging us all on your back.

You've noticed? He laughs, he gives me a Jewish shrug. Moses laughing is something to see. It begins in his hard, broad belly and proceeds into his chest, and finally explodes. His face glows — again, it's hard to look at him. When the Presence is fully upon him, it's impossible. *Keren or*. Horn of light. Maybe *blast* of light is truer. He veils his face for our protection. But tonight it's...only beautiful. And now, for the moment, it dims, the light. His face — his face is full of grief.

Father, I say. Tell me the truth. You and me, we're neither of us crossing to the Holy Land, am I right?

Is that so important? Your children, the children of your children, will make a life there.

Forty years, father. Such a long time to eat manna only to die before we get home. I understand: it's because of the scouts whining about giants, the people, full of fear, wanting to return to Egypt to die. So they'll die instead in the wilderness.

Moses laughing is something to see. It begins in his hard,
broad belly and proceeds into his chest, and finally explodes.

All but Joshua and Caleb, Moses says.

But, I tell him, why all this judgment? The more blame, the less holiness. It's said that God prays that His compassion have more weight than His judgment. The same can be said about human beings: we should be big on mercy. And after all, what *were* these fearful people? *Slaves* is what they were. Inside and out. What does God expect? What do *you* expect?

He mumbles *Slaves*. It's true, it's true. But Gershom, there's a longer sadness. Even those who were never slaves, they still won't get it. I know this, he says, tapping his forehead with his forefinger. I know — rapping his knuckles against his chest. Even when the bones of the slaves — your bones, my bones, the bones of your Uncle Aaron — are left in the midbar and the children go across to the Holy Land behind Joshua, full of faith and praise, they, too, will turn from God; they, too, will be cursed. And again, and again. I'll tell them, Moses says, tell them just before I die. "Surely this teaching is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it.' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it." I'll say this. But they'll fall, I know, again and again. And what will be left, Gershom?

You tell me, I say. I want to know.

We're bringing the Word, he says. And when our people are scattered among the nations and turn back to God and listen to God's voice, the blessing will be restored. They will return to the land and be granted a circumcised heart. But then they'll fall again; we'll live in exile and exile.

I touch his linen sleeve, my overworked, holy father, tragic father, and I say, It's worse than you imagine...I'm able to see more than I want. I don't add, There's a Ukranian monster who'll take a ragged army from town to town murdering us, a hundred thousand of us. Then, later, there's that ugly little fool, full of himself, full of hatred, a fool with a mustache...I keep this to myself. Let my poor father be.

But I look into his face and I know he knows this, too. Oh, maybe not the details. But the life of our people; the long catastrophe. So why bother to cross out of this wilderness? I want to ask. But I'm ashamed. I know I've been a disappointment to him. I kiss his cheek. My lips grow warm. I say, I know that you have pity for us. You know our weakness. My father.

We sit on the ground by his tent, mourning together.

I go back to Chava and the kids.

Where did you disappear to? She says. Not a question. Blame. As if there weren't enough blame floating around.

I've been speaking to my father.

Did you ask him about a career move?

I sigh and hear Moses' sigh in my own.

Did Moses tell you — the story has been all over the camp — that he asked God to see God’s Presence, God’s glory? God said that no man can see God’s face and live — but shielded Moses and passed by so Moses could feel God’s goodness. Moses heard the words: “Adonai, Adonai, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin...” Some words!

I’ve heard. I have to admit, Chava — I love these words, though I can do without the twist at the end — that God doesn’t remit all punishment but visits the iniquity of parents upon children.

Well? But isn’t that true? my wife says. It means sinful parents bring up sinful children who become sinful parents.

I’m not going to argue with you. I must admit, it’s a joy, Baruch HaShem, we have the radiance with us again. Through the veil over his face we see Moses’ radiance. And now we stand, me and Chava, at the entrance to our tents looking toward Moses’ tent, where the Presence of God is centered. Look there. The shining, I say to my wife. The radiance of God. It’s really something.



JOHN J. CLAYTON has taught modern literature and creative writing for over thirty years at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His stories have appeared in *Commentary*, *Agni*, *TriQuarterly*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and his fourth novel, *Mitzvah Man*, will be published in 2011. He has also published extensively on modern literature, and is the editor of the *Heath Introduction to Fiction*.