

The Stable

By Michael Fine

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The man looked hungry. His face was gaunt, as though he had been living by himself. Firelight caught his bright, searching, haunted eyes. He was bearded and his body was covered with animal skins. He stood in the shadows without saying anything, close enough to be seen but out of harm's way.

"Come and join us, young man!" boasted my father, a big-hearted man with a gruff bass voice who tried to look like he was afraid of no one. "Come sit near the fire, where it's warm. Have something to eat!"

He eyed the stranger, but the man did not respond. Was the stranger deaf and dumb? Did he speak our language? Who could tell what a stranger will do or say? My father was reckless, but at least he had broken the ice.

"It's good! Lamb stew! I give you my word. Safe conduct! We will not hurt you. Not, at least, before dinner," my father said. He must have liked the man's looks.

Still no answer.

"See, we eat it ourselves!" my father said, shoveling a handful of stew into his mouth. "It's not poison."

Everyone around the fire laughed.

The young man stood at the edge of the darkness, the firelight dancing on his face. Only his eyes, which were haunted and lonely, moved, darting from person to person, searching out our intentions.

"Come on! Come on! You hang back like a frightened mongrel, too weak to join the pack. Do you have a tongue? or not?"

Finally the young man took a step toward us. He moved his jaw back and forth, grinding his teeth as if he were thinking but was at a loss for words. I was afraid my father had insulted him and there would be trouble, but he stopped dead in his tracks, still eyeing us warily. Some of the men moved their hands to their belts, not showing their daggers but not unprepared for unpleasantness should any occur.

"Have you no gift to exchange for a meal?" said my father, trying to make the man feel at home, his voice booming out over the dry hills in the darkness.

The man did not respond.

It was a tense moment. My father was as likely to have such a stranger killed as entertain him, but there was something about this one, the driven, haunted look, perhaps, the skepticism mixed with eagerness to trust, that made the old man warm up and wax beneficent.

"Don't be so bashful, friend," my father said. "You'll be my guest. Looks like you've done some mighty hard traveling. Have something to eat, get warm,

and tell us your story. We'll trade you dinner for a good story, how's that! We like stories here! Stories, news of faraway places, good lies, bad lies, it doesn't matter. Eat, and then you can talk into the night, and maybe you'll help us forget this cold wind as we drift off to sleep in our sleeping sacks. Either join us or go back into the hills. We don't allow stray dogs to hang about the fringes of our camp. Stray men are no better."

To my surprise the man smiled and took a few steps forward.

He was not as old as he looked, and, closer to the fire, he appeared more driven than gaunt, measured and careful, as if he was disciplining himself, not starving himself. He had bright piercing eyes that were very dark, that were wise and suspicious at once. Careful perhaps. Not angry though. Eyes that had lived and learned.

Soon he was eating cross-legged before the fire.

He ate. He ate with gusto, as though it had been a long time since his last full meal.

But he didn't say anything for a long time. I wondered again if he spoke our tongue. He watched us all carefully, as though he was afraid we were trying to trick him.

We ate, and there was laughter. When someone had something to say, there was conversation. Life was never dull in our camp. But finally, the full stomachs and the cold night began to take their toll, and we fell silent.

Suddenly, without warning, the young man began to speak.

He spoke with a soft lisp. He spoke slowly at first, like a man who carried valuables, as if he were reluctant to show us what he had until he thought he could trust us. But then the story spilled out of him like water running down a ravine after a storm. He spoke quickly and without interruption, and there were many things he said that I did not understand, and many strange people who I don't think I shall ever come to know, but still these people and these events are still alive in my memory, even after all these years.

"It is early, and still cool," he began, lisping. His eyes were clear and his voice was thin, as if he was speaking from his throat. "It is early and still cool as we start on our daily walk through the temple gardens to the great stable. Pharaoh is strangely silent. Pebbles of white marble crunch under our feet, and all at once a small bird flutters up from a sculpted bush. Its wings, twisting wildly, must have touched some chord in Pharaoh's lost thoughts, because he smiles and says, 'Ah Moses, don't you get bored of our morning rides? You're just an earthbound

creature and dross, but the blood of Ra flows *my* veins. Don't you ever want to break the mold, to shoot the works, to try for the big time? The steeds in my stable are nothing, not worth talking about, compared to some of the horseflesh that Stanos the Greek, the tipster who hangs around the shadows of the palace, tries to bend my ear about. You've heard of the fiery nostrilled horses of the gods?

"I don't say anything because Pharaoh goes on these verbal binges often, and I know he doesn't like to be interrupted. The old king, a plain man, is wild-eyed and hopping, and he believed all that garbage about being descended from Ra, so he thinks whatever he says is as good as prophecy. I'm stupid enough, back then, to almost believe it myself.

'Come on, boy,' he says, 'that woman of the bull-rushes, what's her name? must have peppered you with stories about the Wing'd Steed, or of the horses with iron hooves and a taste for human flesh, weaving them into those wild theories she has, theistically. Even the Italians have legends copped from us.'

"I half-nod, half-shrug, so he knows I'm paying attention.

" 'There are horses that mount the sky, Moses, horses with jeweled wings and unbelievable gaits...'

"Suddenly the old man breaks off, and I see him trembling. Maybe there is something to that story of divine blood after all, I think, and I grasp the old man's arm to calm him down. If he keeps up like this he'll give himself a heart attack and

we'll fill that great tomb too soon, descendant of the gods or not. Blazing eyes don't fit him. He's a paunchy old noble, and usually bored, even with the young boys they bring for him at night. I'd seen the old boy steaming angry before, but never obsessed like this. It was more than his usual daydreaming.

“ ‘Damn it,’ he shouts, ‘I'm a god and I know it. Those nags. They're the same every day. They're asleep on their feet. Loose legged gallops, jolting trots, even breakneck racing down long stretches of Nile beach. It's more pounding than speed, more bounce than brilliance, more headlong stumbling than the ideal embodiment of rarefied force, more sweat and bastard breathlessness for both horse and rider than the wild blindness of the sky that I'm after. Don't they teach you about boredom, boy? Haven't you yet learned the meaning of ennui? Or are you still content to needle slave girls behind the palace columns? I'm of the gods. I deserve my place among them, and I'm going to claim it pretty soon.’

"Pharaoh quiets with anticipation as we near the imperial stable. His face, set against the white robe and morning sun, is pale. I wonder when all this quivering, this impatient excitement will get the better of him, when Ra's get many times removed will falter. Oh, I know all about his wild deities, about the lies he tells himself probably better than he does, for Jochebed has prepped me well.

"The sweet, wet, rotting barn smell reaches out and enfolds us as we close in on the great, dark door, or it closes around us, to put it more exactly. The stable is

long, brown, and dark. Rich as chocolate and sweet as honey. The only light is from the two great doors at either end of the long wood-and-stone tunnel. The stalls open out of the darkness one at a time, one stall on either side.

“Horses here lead a pampered life in times of peace; in times of war they work like slaves, hauling and charging, and get mauled for their trouble. We hear them chomping as we walk, and hear them stamp and snort, quiet and chewing in the darkness. Two fat horse asses, one on each side, appear in the brown light as we walk together, good strong backsides with strong, proud tails and powerful legs, and we chose from what we see.

“I see two or three, on the side reserved for Moses that please me, but as protocol demands, I wait for Pharaoh, wait until he finds his god-horse.

"For the first few minutes, as we walk down the line, the old man says nothing, for he sees no steed sufficient to his desire. Finally, ready to give up, he stops to check one beast out, a big black stallion, and heads for the stall to run his hand over the creature's flank. But he moves too quickly in the stall, without enough warning, and upsets the dozing animal, who lashes out with strong hooves, god-man or not. Pharaoh, always on the alert, steps quickly out of the way, a politician to the last. But once outside the stall he scowls, ‘Bastard. Bastard lowlife.’

"The old man squints, eyes the heavy-muscled legs, and moves toward the middle of the aisle between the alley of stalls. No one could ever call the old man reckless. Or brave. He learned caution when he was young, the hard way, and that's why he's lasted so long.

"His voice trembles, and then he starts again in a determined monotone, almost a whisper.

" 'I've heard tell,' he said, 'from that Greek bookie I mentioned, of a young man, your age, not so slow in speech or movement, who claimed descent from the Greek sun-god, the god who with four-in-hand and chariot pulls the Greek sun across the Greek sky.'

"The old man pauses, and eyes me with a fierce jealousy.

" 'This youth, this miscegenated boy, handsome and brave though he may have been, had the audacity to go to his father, the god of the Greek sun, and claim his birthright to the horses, immaculate steeds that put all of these to shame, horses buff and wild enough to drag the sun out of its hiding place and fearless, horses able to haul that sun across the Greek sky. And the father, this god of the Greek sun, gives in, says sure, take the horses out for a spin, and off the boy drives, a boy behind steeds which each put ten of Pharaoh's to shame. I confess, of course, that those horses were but tame shadows of Ra's fire-breathing steeds; that god, a pale boy before the power of Ra; and that sun, just a glimmer of starlight beside the

powerful flaming scorcher of the Nile. Yet those horses, so huge, so much stronger than most, pulled for him until they broke away. He, that bastard boy, not even genuine royalty, had his moment of brilliant ecstasy, on fire in the sun, his fifteen minutes of fame, on fire, if you will, driving them or trying to.'

"The old man paused. He took a closer look at a roan gelding.

" 'But Pharaoh,' I venture, as tactfully as I could. Pharaoh likes me then, even more than any of his bastard sons, but there are limits to what I can say and I know those limits well. I'm no bureaucrat but I'm no upstart either. Not yet.

" 'Pharaoh, Phaeton rode behind Phoebus' horses when he was young, in his prime at two and twenty years. And his father blessed him for the ride! But remember how it ended. The great swift-footed steeds, fire- breathers all, sensing that there was a lightweight behind them, a novice, an amateur without any pull, tear the steel reins from his hands, get their heads, and take off wildly across the sky, dumping Phaeton headlong into the sea and scorching the earth in the process.'

"I'm showing off my command of mythology, theology and philosophy, and it makes Pharaoh laugh.

"He snorts at me.

“ ‘Close, boy. Zeus the thunderer smacks the kid with a thunderbolt, and sends him flying when Ghea, the Greek earth, gets uptight. You don’t burn your mother and get away with it!’

“He laughs again and jostles me. I've done my job, served my function, acted my role, and put the old lecher in a better mood.

“ ‘Come on,’ he says. ‘It's time to ride. Let's choose our horses.’ He was smiling in the dark, happy to be free of that odious visionary mood.

"We near the far door, and as we approach, the number of available horses shrinks. The light, which suddenly seems too strong to us, bleached color out of stalls and steeds. The royal stable manager, a wiry, dark Bedouin from the Sinai who was growing fat on Pharaoh's payroll, knew well his master and his master's moods, and understood the attacks of poignant unfulfilled desire which occasionally swept his royal majesty.

“The horses of Thrace, the best and strongest by far, were stabled at this, the far end, and on the right, Pharaoh's better side, so just as the old man's hopes began to flag, he'd find these most glorious of earthly steeds, their haunches rising out of the half-light before him, and the air filled with spirited throaty whinnies.

“The old man's fallen spirits rise as soon as he sees these fabled, battle-bright mounts. Man eaters? Perhaps if you aren’t man enough to take control. Pharaoh slows and studies each.

"The first of the good lot is the largest and most fiery, an angry bay, and Pharaoh always passes her by, not from fear, or so he claims, but because his station demands a lordly stallion of striking color, and the bay, though strong, is equally mean. Then, to my surprise, he slowly passes by his favorite mount, a variegated stallion, whose many colors and blazon blue eyes shamed any horse I could find to ride. Pharaoh passes up horses number three and four, and I wonder what's on his mind. He draws up behind a yellow gelding, pink-eyed, white-maned and stomping about in his stall. Poor royalty!

"Pharaoh chooses the horse that best matches the way he feels, and that gelding. . . I wonder if he's having trouble with his age and with (could I dare to think this of the honorable descendant of Ra). . . his manhood?

"The yellow horse is throwing up a racket, snorting like a bull elephant and fighting his lead. He threatens to tear the stall to splinters. He must be feeling all bottled up inside.

"The old man nods, and slaves gather -- they have a wild beast to subdue and put in harness, and the yellow horse won't give in without a struggle, that's for sure.

"Poor Pharaoh. This is the horse most mad to run, and though the old boy is usually afraid, this day he is beset with speed dreams. I wonder what went on last night, and what stew the palace gossips will make of his choice of horses when they find out.

"But there's not time for idle speculation. Pharaoh looks at me. It's my turn to choose a mount.

"My usual mount is a small swift mare, a sweet dispositioned, loose-footed thing, who could move like the wind when I wanted a little run, but who wasn't prone to playing high-spirited games with me. I could trust her not to leave me on a low-hanging branch or sitting on my backside in the middle of a stream. I'm no mean horseman, but no showman either. When one rides with Pharaoh it's important not to look more splendid or dazzling than he, and he, being such a plain and jealous man... well, one has to work at it to be sufficiently subdued.

"Walking down the row of stalls, I see the little mare's nest is empty. Must have pulled up lame, I think, and look down the remaining horses on the left side, at the mounts reserved for me.

"I like a horse that knows how to move, that is nimble and moves with his mind, that is swift *and* agile. The stable was filled with big-boned war-horses, clumsy rubes, great for a headlong charge, but loose-gaited and jolting, too ponderously heavy for a morning ride. I backtrack a few steps, hoping I overlooked some notable beast in the darkness, but see nothing of interest, and walk again down toward the bright door.

"How I'm wishing for a break in the high row of rumps. How I'd love to wrap my legs around one of those small desert ponies wanderers love to ride.

“But there's nothing.

“Then, suddenly, just as I'm about to give in and call for an ugly Roman-nosed bay, I spy to the right, off on Pharaoh's side, a break in the great wall of buttocks.

"She's a mare as well, and jet-black but for a hand's width white circle about her girth, small of stature, even slight, but snorting, filled with spirit. Tied to the back wall, you could see her eyes rolling.

“She hates the barn, I think. The horses, walls, people, darkness, noise – too crowded. She's out of her milieu. She has the blazon blue eyes of Pharaoh's favorite, but is lithe, and wildly beautiful. A bit spunky for me but...

“I look at Pharaoh beseechingly, for I'd be taking a horse reserved for him. He thinks a moment, fighting jealousy, but finally he gives in, and nods approval. She's too small, he thinks. She'll be put to shame by the big yellow.

“Pharaoh's horse is almost ready. I can see he's getting impatient and wants me to hurry.

“I always prepare my own mount -- groom, bridle and saddle by myself. The slaves are efficient, but uncaring and flustery. All they do is make the horses nervous. I speak to her and slip into her stall, laying my palm on her rear. She is well muscled and tense but calms a bit as I talk to her.

“I call for the grooming pieces and she looks at me out of the corner of her eye. Then I run a brush over her, though her hide appears clean and her coat is already sleek. Slipping under her neck, I brush her right side, but she backs off and snorts, as if I've hurt her. It's strange, for horses usually quiet when they're being curried, and I look for a cut or a saddle sore that might be sensitive -- but find nothing. Must be a special phobia, I think. Horses, like the people who care for them, are plagued by irrational fears. I know enough not to push my luck, and leave her be, stepping outside the stall again to receive a saddle from a waiting stable slave.

"Pharaoh is already out in the yard, grave, attentive and standing on a mounting block. He glances at me, his jaw set, and I can see he's in a hurry, but I wait to watch the impatient old man mount the yellow gelded charger. The horse is brought up, prancing and anxious behind a lead, and Pharaoh hops on him without a second thought.

“Pharaoh’s horse takes off at a quick lope before Pharaoh can get his stirrups. The old man bounces like a boulder rolling down a hill, and I think the horse'll pitch him, but he somehow keeps his seat, gets hold of his stirrups, grabs the flapping reins and brings the yellow horse around.

“I have to hurry now, and with the saddle over one arm, I slip back into the stall with the little black mare.

"The little black stands still when I throw the saddle on her back, which surprises me. I was expecting her to give me trouble. Then I reach down to catch the girth and I tighten it around her belly. As I'm buckling the girth, she quivers.

"Strange, I think again. Then I catch sight of a strange metallic glimmer from her rump, or at least I imagine I see one.

"The saddle tight, I step backward to take a closer look, hurrying because I know Pharaoh is waiting. Speaking to her, I step in, careful to stay out of the range of those sharp hooves.

"I lift the hair on her rump by running my hand against the grain of her coat. She shivers and snorts, as if I'm touching a most sensitive spot.

"Her skin is pale and white beneath the sleek black coat. Sewn into the skin are strands of a golden fiber, possibly gold itself, and worked into the surface of the skin is a yellow gold tint, and a clear shining of silver, as if the skin had been dyed. Some desert nomad tattooed this horse with a scene of brilliant splendor, which I cannot make out, for the black coat has grown back over this artistry. What is depicted here?

"I am tempted to call Pharaoh, show him what I've found, and have a slave shave off the hair overgrown in this pictorial garden so we can see the panorama pictured, but thinking of Pharaoh's impatience to run, I hold back. Besides, *I* found

it. Maybe it's a great secret, one I'd best keep it to myself. Omens and prophecies are personal. They are not to be shared around, not to be diluted by the hoi polloi.

“I slip a halter over the little black's head and lead her out into the paddock.

"Pharaoh decides he's tired of the riverbank, and soon we are cantering down a palace road toward the royal woodland. We ride through the forest paths, horses held in check under the low growing branches, and soon the foothills roll around us. Whenever we break from the woods into a clearing or length of grassy pastureland, Pharaoh laughs at me and my little black mare, spurs his swift footed Thracian charger, and gallops off on the bounding strides of the yellow, not to be seen again until I catch him at a wall or the border of another woodland. But the black, though little, is very quick, and I'm not one to settle for a constant diet of humble pie, so his royal is never too far ahead, and when we do catch him, we blister past along a narrow curving woodland trail, and slip blithely beneath low branches.

“Pharaoh lopes behind me now, the yellow lathered and fighting, while Pharaoh ducks those branches and guides his mount around the maze-like turns.

"Suddenly one cloud joins with another and one more and then cloud-cover chokes off our sun and its warmth.

“The sky goes green-black, and then twists itself purple. Winds twill through the trees and whistle through the wooded hills. Then the lightning starts, and is

followed by flat, flapping, immense thunder. Someone's moved the evening cloud burst up, I think, and deigned not to warn his royal majesty. So much for his omniscience.

“Our horses, the brilliant yellow most, toss their manes and tug against the reins. I am frightened of the shaking earth and look about for shelter, but Pharaoh, flying high and proudly aware of his lineage, accepts the challenge, laughs at me, turns the yellow horse loose, and digs his heels into the yellow flanks.

“The shining steed needs no encouragement. They gallop away at a dead run. Pharaoh, short and dumpy, quite bald too, not looking anything like a horseman ready to conquer the elements. Hubris, the Greeks call that trait. That pride and this word would describe Pharaoh well if he weren't an emperor and unquestioned ruler of all he can see. And if we were ever permitted to see what we see and say what we think, sometimes new clothes being nakedness after all.

“But who am I to speak? I ride to a cave I know of in some cliffs, and lead the little black inside. Here we sit out the big blow, the storming barrage of thunder.

"The little black stands quiet at the mouth of the cave, glad to be out of the storm, I think. I don't even bother to tie her -- I know she'll stand. What I wouldn't have given for some tinder, dry wood, and glowing embers with which to set a fire.

“But the cave is bare. I walk a little into its depths, bored by the storm and

in want of a little adventure, but the cave becomes too quickly dark, and I think, it's better not to press one's luck with what one knows nothing about. I sit on a rock, watching the ravishes of rain, waiting for the storm god to release us, and think of valiant Pharaoh, dashing like a foolish peasant in the smacking torrent.

"Suddenly I remember the tattoo. A perfect time to see it for myself, an opportunity arisen as if by design.

"I split a rock to make a sharp edge. I tie the black in case my touching that sensitive place makes her want to bolt, knowing about her special skin and sensing her rain-induced skittishness. Then I begin to shave the hair from her rump, as Pharaoh's women shave the hair off their already naked legs, and as his priests shave their domed heads.

"Soon, whole sections of white, gold and silver skin are bare. Bits of scenes emerge and knit together. In the light from the purple clouds, that rump lit better from time to time by rapid flashes of lightning, I see that the skin is not merely tattooed, nor was it simply dyed, but that gold and silver dyes were used to shade and accent a drawing on the skin that was stitched in fine gold thread, which produced the glitter I had spied at first.

"Finally the skin is clear. The drawing or scene completely covers one half sphere of the horse's rump.

“When it is revealed, I realize what I see is a scene more carefully drawn, more brilliantly executed than any painting or mural in Pharaoh's palaces or in his tombs or even any that adorn the halls and houses, public, private or whatever, anywhere in Egypt. It is a mural in miniature, a pastiche, a number of tiny views that tell a story and combine into one grand picture.

“In the center, the largest panel depicts a multitude, a crowd as numerous as the stars in the heavens, walking through a wilderness, following a blistering, blazon gold and silver light that comes down from the heavens. Scattered around the main panel are the smaller scenes: a tiny boat shaped like a cradle floats in the bull-rushes near a knot of beautiful bathing women; a young boy wanders in a great palace, looking dull and out of place amid the splendid officialdom; a murder, where one man, young and strong, strikes another, older and not so fit looking, with a whip, while a third man looks on with a vicious, criminal smile of enjoyment on his face: some vegetation, consumed by crackling fire; a panel showing snakes, and magicians; and one that shows an oasis in the wilderness, with water flowing from amid rocks.

"This is not a flat picture, like those drawn by Pharaoh's artisans, but one that has depth and perspective, and everything looks real. The images are full and lusty. Things are as the eye sees them, with far things seeming far, and near things rising up before my eyes.

The young bearded man who called his own name Moses stopped there.

We were all still awake, and waited for more, but nothing more was forthcoming.

We looked around at one another, bemused at this man's style, but then my impatient father, who hates to be left hanging, said, "Well? Isn't there more? Will you simply abandon us there? What happened between then and now, and what brings you here, or is your tale just a fantasy concocted in trade for warmth and eats?"

The bearded man who called himself Moses looked up, hurt. He paused, unable to speak, and ground his teeth back and forth against one another as if thinking whether he should disclose a great secret. He started again, this time with a more pronounced, slow lisp, the sound of a snake slithering through sand. He ignored my pa, and looked sadly into the fire.

"The storm abates before long, of course. The rest is history, painful and criminal. On my way home I catch a foreman beating one of Jochebed's people, leaning heavier than necessary on the lash. My thoughts, still agitated by that encounter with high art, call for better things, and I tell the foreman to let the slave

alone. Submerged in rage he hears me not but it looks to me like disobedience. I dismount, myself enraged, call again, and let reins of the little black horse drop.

“Still the foreman does not hear me. I shout with all my might and spook my mount. She kicks up her heels and disappears.

“Angered more at the idea of having to walk home than by the impudence of the foreman, I shout again. Nothing. No response.

“The slave runs off to get help as I strike the foreman. No doubt he will testify against me.

“I hit the foreman once, twice and then he drops, dead I discover. I flee on foot after sinking his body in the sand, knowing full well that Pharaoh's men will find him.

“I ran to the south and west. To here. Pharaoh's men still pursue me, so I live alone now in the mountains or wandering in the desert, waiting till the heat's off. That foreman was the bastard of a wealthy and important family. Pharaoh could not let me go scot-free if he wanted to, and after my running off like that I dare say he'd like to see me disemboweled.

“So it is mountains, desert, and loneliness. Only when the night is cold and my stomach empty do I come towards the firelight, and exchange this story for warmth and a meal, though like you, most who hear it take what I say for nothing more than fantasy, the wild speculations and exaggeration of a loner.

Who could improve on that ending? My father, somehow touched by the story, sent me to the man, to give him warmth and better.

He lived and traveled with us for nearly two years, and disclosed he had a flock of his own, which grew larger the longer he stayed with us. A strange man. Wont to making mountains out of molehills, to seeing gods where there was only burning underbrush and water where there was only rock.

His seed caught in me twice -- one cries before us now, and one is on the way.

But the bearded man went off again not long ago, back to Egypt. He said he had some unfinished business there. He promised to return for the man-child and myself, but you know compulsive wanderers.

When I see him again I'll believe it.

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