

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND BY JEFFREY MILLER

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A few years earlier, we had moved into the new tract house, a little bungalow that cost \$11,000, in Jefferson County. It was squat and construction grade, but my parents were over the moon. During the first four years of my life we'd lived with my mother's parents in their aged fourplex on the West Side. As the younger Jewish families migrated across town to the East Side, shtetl was giving way to barrio. Sitting on Bubbie's West Side porch one night after supper, Great Auntie Bette saw someone fire a gun three houses away, at a car in the street. The time was right to make our own way in the world, like our ambitious neighbors, never mind that my father's salary didn't quite run to East Side mortgages. We went south instead, to the suburbs, wide-eyed pilgrims in one of the numberless drywall-and-Formica Edens colonizing postwar America.

Our treeless subdivision was called Lynwood VII, the Roman numerals suggesting hidden qualities. Most of the year I felt my otherness there numbly, as a matter of routine. Monday to Thursday after school, while my classmates were at boy scouts or 4-H Club or playing sports, I was bussed back to the West Side to attend another ninety minutes of school – Hebrew school, bar mitzvah class, *cheder*. The Citizenship Office called my grandparents “legal aliens,” but I personified it: wandering Jew. And now the winter holiday season had rolled around again, when this otherness became spectacular.

Yet again the Melamed homestead stood uniquely, extravagantly undecorated with

wreaths and plastic Santas, garishly bereft of the stunted spruce tree festooned with lights flashing in the picture window, framed in aluminum with standard-issue double-glazing. In the anxious hope of mollifying my teachers and Yahweh all at once, once more did I lip-synch “Silent Night” and “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” terrified that the Eternal would strike me dead if I actually gave voice to such apostasy.

On this particular Saturday in 1961 or thereabouts, it was cold but there was no snow on the ground. Paulie Schneid, a friend from *cheder*, was visiting for the weekend. Paulie still lived on the West Side, but in a big new house built on the foundations of the duplex his mother's parents had lived in, the home where his mom had grown up. We were playing tackle football in the back yard with some neighborhood kids, never mind that the ground was hard and it was the Sabbath, a peripheral matter at our new bungalow in a gentele neighborhood. During a time-out in play, as we sprawled on the expanse of yellowing lawn between my family's lawn and the Adlams' next door, the discussion turned to what everyone was getting for Christmas.

“We get money. For Chanukah,” Paulie said. “And chocolate.”

“Yeah, chocolate, wrapped in foil, like gold coins,” I said, as if this were as big a deal as a new sled or a racing bike.

“And the reason Santa Claus doesn't come to our houses, you want to know,” Paulie added, “is there is no Santa Claus.” Nobody wanted to know, but that was Paulie. He just had to challenge propositions

that no one had put forward. It was probably cruel, besides, as there were some younger kids in the game. But then they didn't take us any more seriously than we took them.

"Yeah, well, even if there was a Santa Claus," said Sonny-Boy Daley, whose real name was Robert and who had a long, inflamed nose with pinched nostrils, "he wouldn't come to your house anyway." You couldn't blame him, really, with Paulie provoking him like that.

"Why not?" I asked. "He's supposed to be generous and kind."

"Not to you. He wouldn't come to your house because you're Jews."

"Who says? Who says that's why?"

"My dad," Sonny-Boy said, matter-of-factly. So did mine, actually.

"My dad says that, too," Davey Hanson said. "And that you killed Jesus."

"That's why," Sonny-Boy said. "You killed Jesus, so he don't give you presents."

A couple of the other kids sniffed and nodded. The younger ones laughed: Santa Claus's revenge. It was news to me, though, this Christ-killer business: I was a puppy still innocent of its first kick. But apparently Paulie was already in the picture. "Liar. That's a lie. The Romans killed Jesus. If you say the Jews did it, you're an anti-semite."

"So what?" Sonny-Boy asked. He didn't have the first clue what an anti-semite was, of course. None of us did, really.

He and Paulie shoved each other a couple of times, until Mr. Adlam yelled at them out his kitchen window to quit it, and play pretty well ended there. For good measure, Sonny-Boy pushed Paulie to the ground and left.

Though the light was fading and it was getting really cold, Paulie and I stayed out in the back tossing the ball, our hands going red and sore, then wooden. It felt like we were trying to catch the ball with telephone poles taped to our fingers.

"That Sonny-Boy's an anti-semite," Paulie said, and we considered this in silence for a while as we winged the ball back and forth, teasing Mickey, our ragamuffin shepherd-spaniel (another token of Melamed suburbanization), who leapt and panted after the football as it wobbled between us. My mother had named him after Mickey Katz, the Jewish Spike Jones, but not just because she had all his records. She thought it was comical to name a dog after a guy called Katz. "Anyway, they might have Santa Claus, but we've got Judah Maccabee." Paulie meant the champion of Chanukah, of course, the leader of the Jewish resistance that defeated the Greeks at Samaria, and put the Temple back into Jewish hands.

"Yeah, but Santa Claus shows up every year, doesn't he, *shtupping* them with all that loot? Where's Judah Maccabee when you need him, like when Sonny-Boy Daley is shoving you around?"

"Hey, you're living on Santa's turf, Joey. Jefferson County is not Maccabee geography. Don't forget: you're a refugee from the Old Country, otherwise known as the West Side."

How could I forget? "Still, Sonny-Boy's right. If Santa Claus existed, he'd avoid our houses like the plague. Like *ten* plagues."

Paulie shrugged. "He's an anti-semite, too. A merry Jew-hater, ho-ho-ho."

I held onto the ball and put one hand on my hip. "Okay, wise guy: if we're the chosen people, how come the *goyim* get all the best magic? Father Christmas. Virgin births. Resurrections from the dead – like that guy, that Whatshisass."

"Lazarus."

"Laser-ass. Santa Cl-ass. Easter bunny-ass." Paulie laughed, but I'd gone stupid with rage, like spontaneous combustion. "They get all the loot and the best miracles." I left out water into wine. That was not impressive at the time. Anything that had to

do with rising up from the dead like Frankenstein or getting lots of presents, that was impressive.

“We got plenty of miracles,” Paulie said.

“Like what?” I threw the ball hard at him but he still caught it without flinching.

“Like Moses parting the Red Sea. Like you said, plagues of frogs and locusts and boils on the Egyptians.”

“Yeah, great. Egyptian boils. Just what I always wanted for Christmas. You ever see Moses riding a sled in the sky, Paulie, pulled by eight golden calves with wings on ’em, flying him around the world so he can load up your house with a Gilbert reflector telescope – and a Schwinn three-speed with taped racing handlebars, free of charge?” I had my eye on those particular items for my birthday, later that month.

“There’s also manna. We got manna in the desert. Otherwise, we’d’a starved to death. And this time of the year, the candles burned for eight days in the temple, without oil, once Judah Maccabee got it back, like, from the Greeks. That was a miracle.”

“Great. We got a candelabra.”

“A menorah. The promise of Eternal light. Even in the dead of winter, when it was snowing.”

“It doesn’t snow in Israel.

“It wasn’t exactly Israel, and anyway, it does sometimes. Snow there.”

“They got eggnog and ham glazed with honey, and new sleds and bicycles, and BB guns...”

“It’ll put your eye out.”

“Ah, so could the pointy end on this stupid ball.” I whipped the football into the leafless bushes. By then its rubber was hard as a rock with the cold, never mind it had congenital asthma, always leaking air.

And that’s when Paulie said it: “But we got the golem.” It was such a beautiful thought, the consummate answer, it lit up his eyes and made him nod at me all dreamy, like the Chassidic *rebbe* in an ecstatic

trance. “He’s better than a whole North Pole full of Santa Clauses.”

At this early stage of my life, the golem also was news to me, so I said nothing.

“You know, we could make one. A golem. That’d show ’em. He’d teach that Sonny-Boy Whositsass a lesson, the golem would, if we told him to.”

“Sonny-Boy’s going to Colorado Springs tomorrow,” I glumly advised. “To his grandparents’. Taking off school a couple days early. For Christmas.”

“The golem could track him down. No matter where he tries to hide.”

It was time for supper and I was tired and hungry, so I sighed and played along.

“Okay, so how could we make one?” This was long before cloning, after all.

Paulie shrugged again. “Easy peasy. All’s you need, really, is some dirt and some water. And the magic spell.”

“But we don’t know the magic spell,” I said, relieved, really, assuming the spell would be something hopelessly obscure out of the Five Books of Moses, or maybe the Talmud. And we were only in our second year of Talmud Torah classes. Probably the spell was something only a really old, really religious guy would know, like Paulie’s *zeydie* or one of those grumpy *alter cockers* at the orthodox synagogue on the high holidays, who smelled of boiled potatoes and moth balls. I could just about smell them now, even in the cold; or maybe it was the sulphurous anxiety, light and weighty all at once, flaring in my belly.

“I know the magic spell,” Paulie said. I rolled my eyes, but allowed silently that maybe he did. Paulie knew a lot of stuff. Or thought he did.

So the next day, after staying up way later than we were supposed to, drawing golem prototypes on the clean side of used paper my dad brought for my sister and me from his work as a draftsman at the Department of Highways, we made a golem.

According to Paulie, the most famous one had been created a long time ago, by Rabbi Loeb in Czechoslovakia or Prague or somewhere like that, to kill all the anti-semites in the neighborhood. And one time some other rabbis had made a little calf golem, which they ate for supper.

Don't ask. Maybe the local butcher wouldn't give them credit or something. I don't know. Anyway, what you did is you got some mud and formed it into the shape of a man. The trouble in this case was, it's mid-December and the ground's frozen solid. "There's dirt under our house," I found myself saying, even though I knew I shouldn't be. I had a pretty good idea where it all would end, but I just kept talking, like I couldn't help it. Even though my body hummed with dread. "In the crawl space, where it's warmer," I explained, all the while observing myself with horrified curiosity, like I was outside myself, watching with my stupid mouth wide open.

There was no basement to our little first-time buyers' house, just a dug-out area between the floor and the foundation. My father had been in the crawl space, but I never had dared it. The Catholic girls across the street told us Hell was in there. It would have been interesting to verify this theory, but there were the spiders to consider, the June bugs and pincher-beetles, and possibly rats and snakes. Or rabid bats. My mother was scared of those especially. Maybe they wintered there.

"Crawl space?" Paulie asked, scrunching up his face.

I showed him the trap door at the back of the house, between the kitchen window and my sister's room. He yanked it up by the handle and squinted into the bowels of our house, a clinician at work. "You got some kind of shovel? And a flashlight, maybe?"

"Yeah," I said and turned to go to the garage. I considered saying no, but he just would've used something else to dig, like a

hubcap or something off my father's old '53 Chev, our family car, which was already in bad enough shape without Paulie's assistance. You had to start it off in second gear, *af tseluches*, as my Dad always said in Yiddish when he meant for crying out loud, because first was shot, and that was when it was running to begin with. Even now, the old jalopy was sitting in the garage with hunks of its innards on the floor, among the tools my father was using to try to fix it.

"And a bucket. Some kinda bucket."

Fortunately, Dad was not in the garage at the time. Otherwise, he would have asked what I was doing with his dry-cell-powered lantern, my mother's galvanized mop bucket, and the rusty old long-handled spade, a refugee from cement work in my Uncle Si's contracting business.

Paulie handed out six buckets, I think it was, of the soil from the footings of our bungalow. "What the heck'm I supposed to do with this?" I'd asked, lifting out the first load.

"Hide it," he said, panting, even sweating a little.

"Hide buckets of dirt? Where?"

"*Nar!* How should I know? It's my house? In the garage, *nu?*" So bucket by bucket I dumped the soil in the garage, at the front, near the car's passenger-side front wheel, behind a couple of those ten-pound bags of food we got on sale for Mickey. Then, as Paulie slapped at the dirt and cobwebs on his parka and jeans, I got some water from the kitchen and mixed it with the dirt pile into a heavy mud. We shaped the mud into a small snowman, more or less, but made of soil. A mudman.

"It doesn't look much like a man," I noted, touching the golem's hands, which were not hands at all but concave stumps sticking north and south straight from his hips.

"Close enough," Paulie said, snuffling the way he did: "deviated septum," whatever

that was. “Now we need a stick. Like a branch or something.”

I handed him a paint stir-stick from my father’s workbench. “Will this work?”

“Let’s see.” Sticking his tongue out, he scraped at our golem, on where his heart would’ve been if we’d made a real man. It was in place of his soul, Paulie said, because he wasn’t human.

“Yeah, but what the heck is it supposed to be?”

“Can’t you read it, stupid? Jeez Louise, I thought you could read Hebrew by now.”

I put my face up close and squinted, but it didn’t look like Hebrew to me, not even script Hebrew. Paulie insisted it said *emes*, the Hebrew for “truth.” “Golem’s can’t talk,” he said, “because they’re not really people. They’re human creations, not divine. But they embody the truth. Justice.”

“Great. Justice is not just blind now but dumb. What’s next?” I meant this anxiously, in many senses. This was how it was with Paulie around.

“Now we have to complete his artificial soul. We have to like give him, you know, artificial respiration. Like God breathed into Adam.”

“Feh? On mud from the crawl space? Full of bat and snake crap? You do it.”

“I did all the rest. Now it’s your turn. It’s your crawl space.”

“All of a sudden it’s my crawl space.”

This was too much like playing God, which was a terrible sin, a capital violation of the most serious Commandment. But I didn’t want Paulie to call me a chicken, especially after I’d refused to go into the crawl space. We had put a little hole for a mouth, with the paint stick, and I blew into it a couple of times, breathing hypnotic clay. Nothing happened. I blew again, harder. A tiny spider crawled out and down the golem’s chin.

Paulie took the tarp from under the parts for the Chevy, mixing them all up in a

messy pile as I watched in mute horror, like a golem, which he covered with the thing. “Maybe it has to dry first. Meanwhile, let’s go look up some prayers. I think you have to say some prayers, *daven* over it, like. Maybe you got an old *tallis* for him.”

We went into the house and looked through Dad’s daily prayer book. Given that the golem seemed pretty well lifeless, we figured the prayer for the sick might be appropriate. But I drew the line at putting my father’s prayer shawl on an alleged humanoid made of mud.

We went back into the garage and pulled the tarp off the mudman, which was metamorphosing from dark brown to reddish as it dried. Rocking back and forth like the old men in the synagogue, we said the prayer in our *cheder* Hebrew: “Praised art thou Eternal our God, king of the universe, who cures the sick.” *Rofey holeem*. The prayer assumed recovery of an already breathing mortal, but it was the best we could find.

“Nothing,” I said and shook my head, then snorted at Paulie. I was beginning to enjoy myself. “Anyway, it’s so small and pathetic, what could it do? You could practically step on it and smush it with one foot.” The golem stood just a little short of the dog food bags, about three feet tall.

Paulie was unabashed. “Once they come to life, they grow really fast, golems. They become giants. Powerful, like Goliath the Philistine. Anyways, you should stop calling him ‘it.’ That’s probably what’s keeping the magic from working.”

“What should I call it then?”

I wobbled my head sarcastically at Paulie, who thought for a couple of seconds. “Let’s call him Gershon, after the son of Moses.” He told me that Gershon meant ‘stranger,’ and when I asked *You think I don’t already know that?*, he just had to go on and explain what I also knew, that Moses said the name was appropriate “because I

was a stranger in a strange land,” meaning Egypt, I guess – or at least probably not Prague. Then Paulie breathed slow and long into Gershon the golem’s mouth, like you would do to warm your hands. Nothing. Then he tried the nose, a couple of dents he’d made with the stir-stick, reminiscent of Sonny-Boy’s nasal configuration. Nothing.

“Hmm,” Paulie said, rubbing his stubble-free chin. “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but I was afraid it would.”

“Come to what?”

“We have to tell it the unspeakable name of God.”

I decided it was safest to let Paulie do this, too, particularly as I was not acquainted with God on a first-name basis and was pretty sure this was for the best. I mean, even Moses was reluctant about that, right? But as with our first mother Eve, a Jew has to know. “Ya mean, Adonony?” I whispered, having learned in Hebrew school that when you saw אָדֹנָי in the bible or prayers, you pronounced it *Adonoy*, so as not to be too familiar with the godhead by actually pronouncing it, if you see what I mean.

“Jesus, stupid. If it’s unspeakable how could it be that, what you can’t say out loud or you’ll die from it?”

It wasn’t that stupid, because, technically, in every day talking (as opposed to praying or bible study) you were not supposed to say “Adonoy” but “Adoshem,” so as not to take God’s name in vain. But I said, “Well, okay, what is it then?”

Paulie looked around the garage then quickly breathed into my ear something that sounded like “Joyvah,” the brand name of the chocolate-covered halvah we often bought at the five-and-dime around the corner from our Hebrew school. As I stood there with my ear hot and wet, and clay still on my frosted breath, Paulie pulled away and stared at me, his eyes wide, both of us garage magicians calculating whether we

would be struck dead on the spot. All the same, Paulie immediately violated the prohibition again, whispering into the ear the golem. Our ugly little Gershon remained unmoved, never having indulged in candy compacted of milled sesame seeds.

Paulie shrugged. “Let’s go look for some more prayers. There must be something you say when, you know, someone has a baby or something. A new life comes into the world, like. That should do it. What you say at a circumcision, maybe, a *bris*.”

We played with my chemistry set for a while, and briefly tried to concoct a life-giving elixir for Gershon the golem. But what we mixed up smelled like rotten eggs and my mother yelled at us to flush it down the toilet. Then we had lunch, forgetting about Gershon for an hour or so.

Meanwhile, my father had got the car running, at least well enough to drive it to the Texaco on Sheridan and leave it on the forecourt, so the mechanics could look at it first thing Monday morning. And as he was clearing his tools off the floor, he spotted the golem. While drying, apparently it had more or less crumbled in on itself, and Dad assumed it was a sign of the season – the annual visit by the rats who each winter burrowed over the cement pad of the garage floor, pushing the soil and rotting plywood inside so as to get at the dog food and relative warmth and shelter. So Dad had scooped up the soil and thrown it back against the outside of the garage, until he’d had a chance to find the place from which the vermin had excavated it.

Of course, we had no idea about my father’s activities in the garage. When at last we went back out there, the tools were put away and our ’53 Chevy was gone. So was the golem. Where he had stood behind the bags of dogfood, there remained only a few crumbs of dried mud.

“Holy crap!” Paulie said. “He’s taken your car.”

This confirmed my own half-formed thought, so it was convenient to remain skeptical. If the golem had stolen our car, my father would never forgive me. “Yeah, sure,” I said. “Even though it wasn’t running.”

“*Nar*, idiot, don’t you get it? He fixed it. They can do that.”

“Even though my dad and two neighbors couldn’t.” Jack Adlam and Burr Krautkremer, the Catholic girls’ father, sometimes volunteered as consultants when Dad tinkered. “Right.”

“He’s our champion, isn’t he? He’s fixed your old jalopy and he’s driving it to Colorado Springs.”

“Colorado Springs?”

“Of course. Because he knows we want him to teach Sonny-Boy Daley a lesson! A golem does whatever his master orders!”

“What’ll he do when he gets there?”

Paulie shrugged and made a wry face. “You don’t wanna know.” But he told me anyway. “Track Sonny-Boy’s family down and kill them. That’s what they do, golems.”

The death penalty for believing what your dad told you. If that was standard practice, there wouldn’t have been many people running around the planet. It seemed pretty harsh, anyway, even if what Sonny-Boy had said was anti-semitic. He didn’t even know what anti-semitic was. Then a worse thought dawned on me.

“What if the cops find out?”

Paulie shrugged again. “It’ll be the perfect crime. Who’s to blame? When Gershon comes home, we’ll put him back under your house. Dust to dust.”

“How do you do that?”

Paulie snuffled and shrugged yet again. “I think you say the prayer for the dead, *kaddish*. So he dies. But first you erase the first letter of *emes* on his body, so you get *mes*, you know, ‘dead.’”

This sounded pretty good, so it had to be true. But it also sounded like yet another

murder. I mean, we’d given the creature a name. Gershon. It’d be like killing Mickey, only maybe worse. Playing God. “But what if Gershon doesn’t come back?” I said, hopefully.

“He will. They always do.”

In theory, it was perfect justice. Death to anti-semites with no one but themselves to blame. And we’d get the car back, even if the seats and floor were muddy and my dad got mad. Yet that was no consolation in the dawning circumstances. I didn’t want anyone to die, no matter what. “The cops’ll blame us,” I pointed out, in a high voice. “And they’ll send us to the gas chamber.” In those days, that was how they executed criminals in Colorado. It was the stuff of horrible romance, particularly if you were a kid. We had no idea that they didn’t prosecute kids, let alone sentence them to death.

Suddenly the death penalty for believing libels your dad told you about Jews didn’t look so bad. The death penalty for killing Sonny-Boy and his family looked considerably worse.

All day Monday I couldn’t concentrate at school. Mrs. Graves yelled at me at least twice to pay attention, and another time she asked me if I was coming down with something, what in the world was wrong with me today. She’d find out soon enough when the cops came flying through the classroom door with their guns and billy-clubs drawn. Although that never happened, I spent the day in an agony of waiting for inevitable punishment. I couldn’t even go home after school to check on developments there. Maybe the golem had returned, with or without blood on his stubby limbs. In a hysterical fog I had to take the bus to Hebrew school class on the West Side. I kept an eye on the *cheder* windows, held my breath when I heard a siren, but the cops

never showed up to arrest me, shamefaced before our teacher Mr. Verderber and the rest of the Jewish public. I was sure they were waiting for me back home, my parents serving them coffee and Hostess cupcakes, smiling at them sadly, weeping into the refreshments as the detectives enumerated my crimes.

It dawned on me with new dread that I'd probably face the music alone. Paulie was well out of it, miles away on the West Side. The Old Country. It had all happened at my house, hadn't it? This was what came of moving to gentile neighborhoods, of being a stranger in a strange land.

When I got back to Jefferson County after six o'clock, my father was waiting in our old Chevy at the bus stop.

"It's running, then," I said, glancing nervously at him.

He looked calm enough, but he was taciturn, and he looked tired. "Yep. We got it running." We? Obviously he didn't know how to break it to me about the cops waiting at home, and I was too afraid to ask. "For now. It's on its last legs, though, this jalopy." This was obvious, I suppose, but in the circumstances it sounded really ominous. Last legs. Just like the Daleys. Just like me. My dad shook his head.

But it was the season of light and miracles. When we drove past the Daleys' place, a red-brick bungalow only a little less squat than ours, Sonny-Boy and his dad scowled at us from step-ladders as they hung Christmas lights on the gutters and around their double-glazed picture window. Their Christmas tree winked garishly at us from behind the glass, like it was just another low-rent Christmastime in Lynwood VII.

And no, I never did tell my father that the pile of dirt he found behind the dog food was actually our champion, Gershon the golem, a superhero with an inhuman soul, engine of justice for persecuted Jews.

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