

# Priscilla

by [Jim Coles, III](#) (March 2022)



*She was the midnight sky,  
Her eyes, twin blue stars twinkling  
in a black velvet universe.  
Her smile, the crescent moon beaming down  
on night-stilled waters.*

## Ak'ordat, Eritrea

That summer of 1959 in the high plateau country of Eritrea, the northern partner in the young Ethiopian Federation, was special. The land here is always lush, verdant and flush with life born of highland tropical rains. And in this year it was bursting with bountiful sorghum and maize crops. Everywhere, in every direction that Bobbo ab Yakov looked the land was green, seeming to dance in the breezes that blew inland from the Red Sea some two hundred miles to the north.

Some 500 Beta Israel families occupied the village of Ak'bnam, scarcely half a day's walk from Ak'ordat, the only city in the area with electricity or running water. The Black Jews, for centuries, masters of this northern region were now reduced in power and size by decades of war and predations by Italian forces during the colonial period, but their well ordered fields and strict Judaic life system made their relative prosperity the envy of the region. The local Arabized Islamic tribes that surrounded this last stronghold of Judaism in the area hated the Beta Israelis, calling them "Falasha," or "outsiders." But for ab Yakov and the people he led, life was good.

He walked through the village that day, his head high and his smile broad for today, his wife Emalal, would bear his first child. He thought back to the end of his youth, just seven years earlier when he had been selected village headman at the same time the United Nations had arranged a UN-administered federation between the former Italian colony of Eritrea and the government of the Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia.

The arrangement had brought peace after centuries of warring with neighboring tribes, both from within Eritrea and marauding Bagarra tribesmen from western Sudan. The UN had sent doctors and nurses, farming experts, and teachers. But most of all, the UN had reestablished the link between these long-separated Black and mixed-race Jews and the new nation of

Israel. With peace had come prosperity, and with that prosperity came hope for the child who would enter the world today, ab Yakov thought. He met another of the prosperous farmers, chatted briefly, then reminding himself of his special tribute to the UN, he told the other farmer that if the child were a boy, he would name him Dag, after the great United Nations leader Dag Hammersjold; and if it were a girl, he would name her Priscilla Florence, after the American Christian doctor the UN had sent to care for his people. By the time he arrived home from his rounds, Priscilla Florence ab Yakov had entered the world.

At 25, Ab Yakov, himself a mix of Italian, German, Bakku-Himah tribe and Beta Israel blood, was tall and stately even for one so young. His tribe thought themselves blessed to have him as leader. His wife, also of mixed race, was beautiful; but their child, this Priscilla Florence was a wonder to behold even from her toddler days. While most Beta Israelis were brown with black eyes and tightly curled hair, she was jet black, with flowing, wavy hair the color of the coal the villagers burned for winter heat...and her eyes were the color and depth of sapphires.

All through the 1960s Priscilla Florence grew in beauty and wisdom. Her devotions were pure and perfect. She quickly learned to read in Arabic, Hebrew and later learned English from the American doctor. Ab Yakov's world was good, his people prospered and the only dissention in the village was the age-old argument over the origin of Beta Israel. Some insisted they were the lost Israelite tribe of "Dan," while others proclaimed themselves descendants of King Solomon and Sheba. Peace reigned, and Priscilla Florence flourished. But storm clouds were forming on horizons beyond the lush hills of Eritrea, and although ab Yakov knew something of the far away storms, he shared none of it with his people for some time.

# Pillage

The autumn rainy season came late in 1973, surely an omen of more bad times, ab Yakov thought to himself. Since the Six-Day War of 1967 the UN-controlled peace between the Ethiopian Federation and Sudan had begun to unravel. The death of Haile Selassie earlier in the summer and the military take-over by Mengistu Haile Mariam left the province of Eritrea without a protector and without hope of defending itself against Mengistu's Soviet-trained and equipped army.

Ab Yakov had recently heard of the resumption of slave-taking raids into the highlands by Sudan government-backed Baggara militias now that the Ethiopian government was no longer interested in protecting its northern province, and ab Yakov feared for their future as he watched Priscilla Florence lead her five brothers through readings of the Torah. He would speak to the board of elders soon about the situation, he promised himself.

The day was ending. Night in the highlands comes swiftly and cool. The daily prayer ritual ended, the meal over, the family readied for a night's slumber that never arrived.

Ab Yakov never felt the bullet that smashed through his skull and exploded his brain, but Emalaia was forced watch the horror of three of her sons being hacked to death before she, too, joined them in death. The Baggaras stormed into the village killing the men, most of the older boys and the adult women. Emalaia was one of the lucky women...she died quickly, but other women were raped then slowly hacked to pieces. Developing babies were cut from pregnant women then strangled with the umbilical cord while the woman was left to bleed to death. And nursing mothers, their breasts cut off and broom handles jammed into their private places, were forced to watch as their infants were impaled on bayonets. Small children of both genders and all of the surviving teenaged girls were rounded up and carried off in the backs of Soviet made

military trucks. The village was burned to the ground, the herds of highland long-horned cattle were slaughtered and the carcasses hauled away to feed the rampaging wave of savages coming from the great sand desert.

Priscilla Florence stood momentarily transfixed, staring at the bloodied remains of the man who had been her father until something crashed into her side, bringing her back to her senses. She saw, for only a moment, her mother fall under the swinging blades of the short, heavy-set strange men. Instinctively, she grabbed her two little brothers and ran toward the darkened extremes of the village, but somewhere in the melee she was knocked unconscious. When she awoke, she found herself bound, gagged and lying among a heap of terrified girls sobbing through their gags as the truck carrying them bounced along one of the rutted highland roads. She fell back into the blackness, despair her only sensation.

## **Wad Medani, Sudan**

Sometime around dawn the truck stopped and the girls were dragged from the truck and tossed into a small stream. Their arms were bound behind their backs, but a gruff man wearing a turban removed their gags then shouted for them to drink and pee. Those who cried were struck across the torso with a Batanga briar branch and again ordered to drink. Priscilla Florence drank quickly then emptied her bladder into the fast running stream, and as she did, she furtively glanced at the area to see if she could escape and realizing that escape was impossible here, she looked for her brothers. They were not in sight, and at that moment couldn't know that she'd never see any member of her family again. Her only realizations were of pain all over her fourteen year old body, a gnawing hunger and unquenchable thirst. Fear had not yet entered her dazed young mind.

Loaded again on the truck, the vehicle bounded westward descending from the cool, moist plateau into the unbearably hot and dusty lowlands. The routine was the same for two more days and nights – drive and stop for water and attend to excretion, until in the distance she saw the outline of squared-off buildings and a tall water tower. Toward evening, the truck stopped at a place of dusty streets, one story, square, mud brick houses, and a few outdoor electric lights.

Although she could speak Arabic, this dialect was different and she couldn't quite understand what the three men who stood beside the truck said. Finally, a huge brown-skinned man with bad teeth and scar on his face began dragging the girls off the truck. Another man pointed to a spot and the scar-faced man took a younger girl to that spot. Another man spoke and another girl was taken to a different spot on the street. And so it went, the girls were divided into three groups. Other men appeared out of the deepening darkness to lash the girls into human chains, and each chain was led away down different narrow streets.

The group containing Priscilla Florence included four other girls, each younger than her. She spoke quietly to them, urging courage and reminding them that God had protected the Israelites in their bondage and eventually made them free. She spoke as much to herself, bolstering her own courage, as she did for the others. The group arrived at an old sheet metal and mud brick building about two blocks from the drop point and the girls were forced inside. The floor was of packed dirt, the walls bare, the only light came from a small oil lamp hanging from a central post. An old woman, haggard and tired looking, spoke to them in their native Hebrew-based dialect.

"Your old life is gone," the old woman said. "From now on you are the property of Abu Nassar Al Huseini. Do as you are told and you will eat every day. Fight against Nassar and you will die." The speech was short and chilling. The girls looked at

each other, their eyes widening, their fear mounting. One girl began to cry and the man who had led them down the dark street struck her hard across the back of the neck with a wooden wand. She buckled and crumpled to the ground. "Make no sound," the old woman ordered. The crumpled girl convulsed once, shuddered and died on the dirt floor as the old woman led each girl to a small room with a barred metal door.

"Take off your clothes and put them through the bars in the door, wash yourselves, put on the clean robe you'll find on your bed. When you are ready, I will give you food," the old woman called out as he walked down the line of locked doors.

The room was about two meters square, a tiny oil wicker lamp hung from the ceiling far above her reach. The only things in the tiny room were a small basin bowl, a bar of soap, a piece of washcloth, and pitcher of cold water sitting atop a tiny table in one corner. A hole cut into the floor of the opposite corner served as toilet. There was no chair or other furniture in the room. The only place to sit or lie down was a wide shelf the length of one wall with a thin mattress and worn blanket atop it. Priscilla Florence stood shaking with fear in the semi darkness, and as the old woman shouted for the girls to hurry, she found herself disrobing and beginning to wash herself.

Bathed and changed into the robe provided for her, she stood by the door and waited for more instructions. Her mind could not yet grasp what had happened, but her body reacted with a gut-wrenching fear that even two days earlier had been totally absent in her young life. After a while, the old woman peered into the room and croaked out, "you'll do." She said something to someone unseen and within seconds a cup of water and a small plate of strong smelling meat, rice and a few beans appeared through the bars. "Eat," a man's voice commanded in that guttural Arabic dialect.

She hadn't eaten for three full days now and her hunger drove

her to consume every morsel, even though the meat was greasy and its stench made her ill. Still, her belly growled for more, but before she should ask for seconds the door swung open and gruff hands jerked her from the tiny room and pushed her across the main room and through a door into a bigger but equally darkened room. Inside, a man sat cross-legged on a large cushion. Another man stood nearby. Priscilla Florence stood silently, hands at her side, fists clenched in both anger and fear. The men spoke briefly, then the seated man said something and she found herself being pushed along into another small room.

The standing man entered the room, said nothing as he approached, then slapped her hard across the face, knocking her onto the bed she hadn't noticed. "Scream and I will kill you, little bitch," he sneered in Egyptian-accented Arabic, as he began to rip away her robe. She tried to cover herself, only to be slapped again, this time harder. The man dropped his own robe, revealing an erection and an evil intent. During the next four hours he repeatedly raped and beat the child-woman, and when he was finished, he got up without a word and left.

Dazed and wounded, she was dragged only half-conscious back to the tiny room where she had left her childhood.

In the five years that followed, she learned the ways of men and she learned how to survive by withdrawing from this nightmare world. They could have her body, but they couldn't have her if she were far away. Over time, she was traded to other Sudanese brothels, and finally she was sent to a brothel in the central Sudan city of Kadugli. The town, and everything in it were the personal property of Amar da Useki, the Commanding General of Sudan's Central Army Group. His brothel was his special prize. He wanted only the best women to service his troops because their loyalty depended upon such fringe benefits.



At 19, she was world-weary, tired of living and had drawn deep within herself, almost unaware of the things the wooly haired soldiers did to her both day and night.

## **Her soul a pitch den, her heart ebony stone**

*She came from the darkest night, into my life a light*

*Love her? She was love*

*Maternal, fraternal, sexual, agapé, and like a*

*Black hole, she consumed me*

## **Nairobi**

I sit now in the first class lounge at the BOAC terminal at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, hardly believing that after all these years I was really leaving Kenya. It feels strange to even think it. After more than a dozen years here Kenya has become my home. But it's true, in two hours I'll be on an out-bound jet. So odd, so very, very odd.

Flashes of memory flicker through my mind, and as the smells that are uniquely Kenyan occasionally pass over me they trigger yet another memory. But I am here now, in one of those moments in which I've met a fellow traveler, I think he said his name was Trevor, and as travelers sometimes do, I come to speak of intimate things. At first, we chat the mindless chatter that anonymous travelers so often babble to each other, and soon I find myself baring my soul to this stranger.

And so the story begins...

Nairobi during the long, spring rainy season is a precious

jewel of a city, a gift from the gods. Although it sits nearly on the equator, the mile-high altitude and temperate climate, twice-a-year rainy seasons, and hyacinth-scented breezes make this one of the most pleasant cities on earth. At any time of the year, Nairobi is an infinitely nicer place than Mombasa, that steaming cauldron of an equatorial port city on the Indian Ocean coastal plain. Unfortunately for me, about half of my work must be done in that cesspool.

I came to Kenya in the mid-70s, right after I got my Master's in petroleum engineering from Florida Institute of Technology. I was 28 at the time the guys from British Petroleum Ltd hired me to work on the pipeline that would carry oil products from the port to Nairobi, some 300 miles inland. The money was good and for a boy from Omaha, working in Africa sounded exotic and exciting.

My mother, God love her, used to say to me "Tommy Johnson, you'll get yourself scalped by one of them wild Africans. Why don't you forget all this Africa nonsense and join your uncle Bruce down in Oklahoma. Old Bruce, he's real big in the *ahl bizniss* and he'd take real good care of you, son." But the call to foreign ports was too strong and I arrived, not quite knowing what to expect, but imagining mud huts and cattle roaming the streets of Kenya's capital.

The man who was officially my assistant, but who rapidly became my mentor in all things African, Dally Entutu-Bai, a Kikuyu from the south of Kenya, met me at this same airport. From that first minute forward, Dally has smoothed over every possible wrinkle and made life here wonderful. He is a trusted friend. Like most of the Kikuyu – the majority tribe of Kenya – Dally is a short man, no more than five feet-eight inches tall, but he's powerfully built, almost blue-black with a round face, large and expressive eyes, and a quick and huge smile. His hair, what there is of it, is a fringe ring of tightly curled gray. When I first saw him he wore a brown, double-breasted cotton suit, short-sleeved white shirt and

dark green cotton tie. Every day that I've seen him since he's worn that same suit and tie combination.

Kenya is a beautiful country, even if the coastal lowlands are not fit for human habitation. The interior of the country has everything...from swamps inhabited by creatures straight out of the age of dinosaurs, to vast and grassy plains where herds of game animals roam and lions stalk them, to towering snow-capped mountains and even a glacier on Mount Kenya. The Great Rift Valley divides the lowlands from the interior plateau. It was there that I first met Doctor Louis Leakey. I was running a survey team to plot an extension of the pipeline route from Nairobi to Lodwar, in the far northwest.

A lesser man would've been angry that some "blasted Yank," as he came to call me, was planning on running heavy machinery through the places where pre-humans had roamed a million years ago. But not Louis; he simply took me down into his dig area and placed a 900,000 year old fossil tooth from a pre-human in my hand and said, "can your bulldozers protect this"? The answer was clearly "no." That's when I realized that I was coming to love Kenya and that it would be my home for all of my forever. In the months that followed I met with Leakey a dozen times to select a new route for the pipeline and then convince the boys in London to agree to the extra cost to re-route the line. But it worked, and I knew that I could do anything I set my mind to. In the years since that encounter, Louis and Mary and their son Richard, have become close friends.

Somehow it was important to let this airport stranger know that I love Kenya in the same way the Leakey family does...passionately.

And then I heard myself blurt out, "But I gotta tell you, brother, that nothing Dally taught me, nothing that Louis showed me, not dealing with the corrupt politicians, or the incompetent ex-colonials here, could have prepared me for what

I've seen in the past few years."

I'm rambling a bit now, but somehow I come back to the point of the story, and as I talk it all comes out in a rush.

It all started, I tell the stranger, when Dally received a call from a pal of his in the Sudan. The pipeline project was almost finished and I was looking to expand my reach in the energy supply business. Africa south of the Sahara has much of what people need to build modern countries, but it lacks commercial quantities of oil and gas – and honest leaders. Dally's friend was looking for a steady supplier of natural gas and refined fuel products. As Dally talked about the deal I began to see that he and I had a future as energy brokers.

After making a number of calls I felt I could put together a deal to bring Indonesian gas and cracked petroleum by ship to Mombasa, then through my pipeline to Lodwar, and from there by tanker truck convoy to Sudan. If Dally's pal bought the deal, we'd be rich. Dally arranged the meeting in a Sudanese town called Kadugli with the regional military commander of Sudanese forces.

## **White knuckles**

As I told you, I love Africa; well I love nearly everything about Africa but I hate to fly the national airlines here. It's what I call 'Third World Air,' and I'll do almost anything to avoid flying in those old and badly maintained IL-62 jets the Soviets gave away last decade. Local aircraft mechanics are so bad that most of the African national airlines have to hire ex-Soviet air force mechanics to keep these old birds flying. But there was no way to get to Kadugli in time to meet this back woods general unless we flew, so Dally made the arrangements and away we went.

The flight lasted only ninety minutes, but sitting in the too-

small seat, with my fingers clamped onto the armrest in what I knew was my death grip felt like an eternity. Somehow, the rickety old plane grounded at Kadugli's single runway airport in one piece. My arms ached for two days, and I was glad to know that our return trip would be by overland freighter and Kenyan rail.

The general, Amar da Useki, met us at the airport and we were quickly ushered around and past customs and immigration then driven to the tallest building in town, a two-story stucco hotel that proudly proclaimed itself "The Ritz." I'd heard of guys like Useki, big, strong, tough and clearly ruthless, but I'd never met one before. I told myself that we'd better get this deal right or we might not be going home.

Business began at supper some two hours later. The general could pay for 250,000 tons of processed fuel products per year and he could pay in both industrial and jewelry grade diamonds. We found out later that the diamonds were to be supplied by the UNITA rebels of Angola. I'd been around long enough to know not to ask what Useki did to earn such a payment. Over the next two days we hammered out the details, signed a contract and received an advance payment of two pounds of industrial diamonds worth about nine million British Pounds. I was very pleased with myself, and more than a little relieved that he'd liked the deal, so I suggested we celebrate.

The celebration, General Useki said, would be "a very un-Muslim party at my house," he said softly as he winked at us salaciously. An hour later his driver picked us up and drove us to a large Mediterranean-style villa about ten minutes away from the hotel. It was there that I first saw her.

## Possession

As we entered the main courtyard I saw that the house staff was spit roasting a small animal, while others lined up drinks. General Useki was dressed in a British-style uniform and a chest full of medals, as were about a half-dozen of his senior staff officers. We were introduced around, had some light chat with the officers then a servant began serving “very un-Muslim” drinks. Next came course after course of really excellent food, followed by more drinks.

My head was spinning slightly when the good general suggested that we go inside the house “for dessert, yes”? In a large and airy living room sat about a dozen pretty black women, each dressed in a different sort of costume. As we entered they rose and began to mingle among us. Smiling smiles too large, and pressing too close against us as they talked, it became clear that these were party girls. One, a short, stout woman who called herself Sharon latched onto me, but my taste doesn't run to the Rubenesque, and besides, I was tired, too full of good food, and feeling just a bit out control from the strong liquor. I tried to beg off, but Sharon persisted. As a means of getting away from the clinging vine, I suggested that I get her a drink and began walking toward the bar at the far end of the room. I literally bumped into the most amazing looking woman I'd ever seen.

“My God, man,” I hear myself telling the stranger, “she was beautiful. Black as night, with chiseled facial features – a thin nose and high bridge, pencil thin lips, perfect teeth, high cheek bones, and a tumble of wavy purple-black hair that flowed almost to her hips...but it was her eyes that transfixed me...they were blue as the bluest sky, and clear as a blue-white diamond.” I continue now...

As I tried to excuse my clumsiness, I heard a loud voice bark a command. Two soldiers appeared out of nowhere, heading toward the woman. Instantly, a chill spread among the women,

their false smiles faded as one of the soldiers grabbed the woman and began to usher her away. She looked at me, a sort of pleading in her eyes, and I said – rather dramatically, too – “Stop! I’ll take her.” The soldier stopped, but it was clear he didn’t understand English, and to cover his embarrassment he struck the woman hard with his fist. She fell to the floor and he tensed his leg as if to kick her. Where I’m from, men don’t beat women and I reacted without thinking. I stepped between the soldier and the woman. Both surprise and anger suddenly appeared on the man’s face, and I knew I was in deep trouble.

Just then, da Useki laughed and said “Ah, the gallant American. You would face down my personal guard to protect a whore slave. Very well, Thomas, she is yours...take her...I admire your courage.”

Whore? Slave? Mine? What would I do her? Americans don’t own slaves. I had no idea, but I knew this had become a matter of honor – for the general because his party had been interrupted. I sensed in that moment that if I didn’t handle the situation right I could lose the contract – and possibly my life. Even after being knocked to the floor she had made no sound, and because she was so unafraid, and her clear blue eyes challenged me to take her if I were man enough, I nodded my assent. And that, my friend, is how Priscilla Florence came into my life.

With just a few words to his soldiers and a wave of his arm, she was gone and the party resumed. I was nervous about the incident but I couldn’t show it. Weakness equals death in most of Africa, and especially so in this room. I acted as if nothing had happened and we drank, we talked, we laughed and danced and I think one of the women blew me, but in acting out my bravado, I got sort of drunk and I don’t remember much of the party’s tail end. Dally later told me that I’d handled the situation just right.

The driver dropped Dally, his companion, and me at the entrance to the Ritz and I somehow got to my room. Dally, grinning very broadly, took one of the party women with him to his room. I couldn't help chuckling, "Dally, you old dog...you can learn new tricks." But in the back of my mind I wondered what had happened to the woman Useki had said was mine.

I turned away to enter my room and noticed a white envelope pinned to my door, with the words "You will need this" printed in English on it. Perplexed, I took the envelope, entered my room, and there, handcuffed to my bed sat the woman, a small bag of personal possessions at her feet. I stood there a second, confused then I looked inside the envelope and found the handcuff key.

I tried talking to the woman, but she wouldn't answer. She sat on the edge of the bed, passive, unresponsive. I uncuffed her but she didn't move. The room phone rang. General Useki was on the other end of the line. He said, "You must beat this one often, but once she knows you are boss she will do whatever you want. Enjoy, my friend. I look forward to my fuel," he said as the line went dead. So, she was mine, but what was I supposed to do with her?

## **Trekking**

I told her to lie down, but she just stared straight ahead...unresponsive to my voice. After a few minutes of awkward silence, I slipped her shoes off, laid her down and put a sheet over her. She closed her eyes and instantly fell asleep. I slept in the big wicker chair, and at first light, Dally, the woman, and I rode away from Kadugli in the overland freighter Dally had arranged. The trip back to Lodwar was three days of bouncing torture but I felt much safer than on any Third World Air airplane. No matter how rough the ride, she neither spoke, nor made a sound, nor moved on her own. She



ate when we placed food in front of her, and she toileted when told to, but something was dead inside this beautiful young woman. What could have stripped her of personality, of spirit, I wondered?

At Lodwar we caught the evening train for Nairobi and arrived at the central train station just after dawn. Dally helped me get her to my apartment in the deluxe high rise building on Tom Mboya Quadrangle, overlooking the city's skyline. It was a magnificent view, but the woman – whose name I still didn't know – saw none of it. She sat for days in an almost a fetal position in a corner of the room where I cleared it for her.

I hired a nurse, but she shrank further back into her corner each time the nurse approached, so I spoon fed her, bathed her and saw the little scars on her back that only repeated beatings with a thorny Batanga plant switch can produce. But it was her eyes that captivated me, that caused me to sit on the floor next to her for hours at a time, saying nothing, just being close by, I think to reassure her that she was safe. Not only were these eyes a fantastic blue, they were empty, devoid of life. Once, toward the end of the first week, I saw a tiny tear appear in the corner of one eye, then she convulsed slightly, and for several days she showed me nothing more.

I guess it was the American do-gooder in me, but something about this broken woman drove me, compelled me to heal her. After some days I took to quietly playing the London Symphony Orchestra hour broadcast on the BBC World Service, while I spoke softly and gently to her. I had no idea if she understood English, but even hurt animals understand a kind voice. I told her of my life in America, of college and graduate school. I told her about my mother and my uncle and my brother and his fat, silly wife. I talked about Dally and about British Petroleum Company. I talked about everything and when I ran out of things to talk about, I read from books. I don't know why, but it seemed important that she hear a

friendly voice. And each night before I staggered off to bed, exhausted, I wrapped a light cotton blanket around her shoulders and she'd sleep in her corner.

## Contact

By the beginning of the third week I was beginning to despair, when out of nowhere, a soft, shy voice came from the corner, "Tom, please, tell me about your mother again." Then silence. I thought for a moment that I had wished to hear the words and that they weren't real, but once more they came, "Tom, please," the soft, broken voice said again in an American accent. I sat beside her and tried to remember what I'd said before, but as I spoke her hand slowly reached out and touched my hand; soft as a feather's brush in a slight breeze.

In the months that followed I learned her name and her story. I learned of her life as a child in Eritrea, the murder of her family, being stolen and forced into bondage, being brutally serial raped and beaten, and I learned of her life as a whore, how she had survived by withdrawing herself from the things her body did. And as she came back to life, I fell in love with Priscilla Florence ab Yakov.

*A billion stars shine in the midnight sky,*

*Weaving the black velvet fabric of a tapestry of light,*

*Blue-black hair, a tumbling cascade*

*From crown of head to symmetrical swell of hip,*

*Reflects the starlight gently in the night*

## Beta Israel

Winter in Nairobi is also a special jewel. The slight shade from the tall palm trees along the river walk beside the Nairobi River on the city's northern edge, creates pools of cool and patterns of sun and shadow. She had told me those long weeks before that her mother always called her by both names – Priscilla Florence – and as we strolled along the river walk one gentle December afternoon, she slipped her hand into mine, smiled up at me and said, "Tom." As the single word left her lips it sounded to me like a prayer.

In all of those months I hadn't touched her, even though I had bathed her, and attended to her feminine hygiene needs. When she was strong enough I took her to hospital where the women's clinic staff had cured the syphilis and gonorrhoea she had contracted during her five-year nightmare. On hearing my name, I leaned over and gently placed my lips on hers. She recoiled almost imperceptibly but only for a split second, then she turned and pressed herself close to me. The kiss was brief, but it lasted a lifetime, pulled me in, took complete possession of my mind and soul, and energized me in ways I had never known before.

Without speaking we left the river walk park and found our way home, and for the first time in her life, Priscilla Florence made love. Tears of joy streamed down her face, her hair seemed joyfully tangled as she trailed its raven tips across my face and chest. The first lovemaking was fierce and furious, but then for hours afterward we turned from passion to the most delicate of intimacies, exploring every nuance of our senses and our combined sensuality.

We were whole now. I, the tall, lanky Yank who had been so at home in Kenya and yet always a foreigner; and Priscilla Florence, risen from a slave's grave to become a free and complete woman, capable of passionate love in both spirit and body. The months that followed were bliss for me, and when at

breakfast one day she told me that she would soon bear our child, I knew what the boundaries of heaven looked like. We married soon after her joyous announcement.

Thomas Dally Yakov Johnson was born at Daniel arap Moi Presidential Hospital September 15, 1978. She insisted that he be circumcised and brought into the family of African Jews. It is through the mother's bloodline that people are born into Beta Israel, she reminded me. And so, TD, as we called our baby boy, became the newest member of the Black Jewish nation. Although I was born into a Baptist family, I began to attend temple with Priscilla Florence and TD, and by the spring of 1980 we lived as a devout Hebrew family.

Her gift for language served my business well. Although she refused to deal with any Sudanese customers, she often helped negotiate profitable arrangements for us.

## **Moses and Joshua**

I awoke alone in the bed one morning shortly after TD's sixth birthday. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee pulled me to the kitchen, expecting to see her there, I found this note standing up against the coffee pot, instead:

*"Tommy, I have an obligation to my people. I'm going home and if I can I'm bringing all the Beta Israelis out. Don't try to follow me. I'll be alright and I'll be home soon. All my love, PF..."*

I stood stunned, and for the next ten weeks I lived in terror that she wouldn't come back, but I had TD – and Dally had contacts everywhere and we learned of her exploits on the long and dangerous road that she had to travel.

The airport stranger's eyes grow wide as he leans closer, "tell me more...what happened"? I draw a deep breath and plunge

back into my terror.

Priscilla Florence had been planning this event for months and our rabbi, Sheen Ma'ier Cohen, an Israeli, was deeply involved. He and Priscilla Florence had made several trips to Israel and after each trip she had returned more deeply committed to her faith until one day she was compelled to take action. I learned from Dally that she and Rabbi Cohen had convinced the government of the modern state of Israel to rescue tens of thousands of the Beta Israelis and bring them to the new Jewish homeland. Her role was to return home and convince anyone who would listen to flee under her protection.

And so was born Operation Moses, a highly secret plan of the Israeli government to bring up to 20,000 Beta Israelis out of Eritrea. Waves of Muslim extremism, coupled with the ongoing Ethiopian civil war, continuing plunder by Sudanese marauders, famine, drought and disease had decimated the once proud Beta Israel and left the few survivors completely helpless.

Priscilla Florence hired a plane and under cover of night, slipped into the highlands of her home province. She often had to hide from Ethiopian military patrols and was nearly captured on several occasions. To be a Black Jew on Mengistu's turf was to be a dead man walking. Judaism had been outlawed and the once verdant lands of the formerly prosperous Betas had been confiscated and then laid waste by the southern Communist savages.

For weeks Priscilla Florence, the people of her village and all other Betas she could find traveled westward in the now desiccated hills, hiding by day and carefully traveling at night, down the plateau and into the sand desert of Sudan. On November 18, 1984 she led some 8,000 Beta Israelis to a rendezvous with a column of Israeli Self Defense Force soldiers waiting for them at the airport at Kadugli. Ironically, Israeli agents had bribed General Amar da Useki for use of his airfield as the launching point for the second

Jewish exodus from bondage.

Priscilla Florence came home to us January 5, 1985 but she left soon afterward to conduct another rescue, this one sponsored by US Vice President George Bush and his CIA, codenamed "Operation Joshua." This time she brought out 800 more Betas by sea where their small flotilla of shabby boats linked-up with an Israeli cruise ship in the Red Sea. The Arab League member states were so outraged by these escapes that they placed a one million US-dollar bounty on the head of my darling Priscilla Florence. But I am a happy man. This woman I love so fiercely knows no fear. When you've risen from the dead how can one fear any man ... or any evil?

The stranger beside me in the first class lounge is hardly breathing now. His senses are attuned to my every word. Finally, he exhales, "Where is Priscilla Florence now?" he asks in an awed tone.

"If I tell you that, I'll have to shoot you," I joke to lighten the mood a bit.

But I know where my Black Jew is – she's in Israel, with TD, running an orphanage for some of the 1,600 "orphans of circumstance," children who became separated from their families during the flight from their Ethiopian bondage. The Israeli readjustment camps, where people who'd never had electricity or running water learn to live in a modern industrial society weren't designed to accommodate the needs of lost, bewildered children. Hundreds of the kids drifted away from the camps and lived like vagabonds on the streets of Tel Aviv, Haifa, and even Jerusalem. Priscilla Florence has gone to our new home and is applying our fortune to the future of Beta Israel.

I can say nothing more now, but a small tear of joy trails down my cheek and the stranger, mistaking my proud tear for a tear of sorrow, intones, "I'm sorry for your loss, my friend."

The lounge manager announces first class boarding for our flight, and I say nothing more. The stranger offers his hand. I take it, and in seconds we proceed toward the air gate, each of us lost in our thoughts. But I have only one thought: tonight, I will hold my beloved Black Jew in my arms again. There must be a god, after all.

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**Jim Coles** was an Army transplant to the Deep American South.

During his (pathetic excuse for a) career Coles was combat correspondent, Army Public Affairs Officer, and Political-Military Affairs specialist.

When he's not in the woods in search of edible game, Coles is actively involved in Alabama state politics.