5,000 WORDS

THE IMP OF THE FRATERNAL

A Short Story

For Nathan Englander

If we cannot comprehend God in his visible works,
how then in his inconceivable thoughts, that call the works into being?

—Edgar Allen Poe, 1845

My parents, Hillel and Frumie Gold, told me this story I'm about to tell you, some 35 years ago, on the night I turned 18, the last time I spoke their names. They thought I should know, as I had begun poring over a hunchback girl I could see as she wheeled her mother to the post office, and any day, I might have declared procreative intentions. They slid me a glass of *slivovitz* filled to the brim, proffering a perfunctory *L'Chaim*! My mother held my hand with a clammy hand, which made me shiver from the shoulders. As our history unfolded, I smelled her brisket, baby carrots, and kasha—foods that would nauseate me thereafter.

I believed them. I didn't assume it was all some elaborate justification for having lost my twin, Naftali, on their watch, five years before—an incident that had cracked the mirror of my identity, rendering it impossible to find myself where and when I looked.

I stuffed my few belongings in a sleeping bag, kissed the kindle of my living siblings as they slept, and ran away. I hitchhiked into Ulster on Route 209, then up the Thruway toward Montreal. By morning, in the blue-glowing cab of a Mack truck that might as well have been a starship, I had changed my name from Avi Gold to the name by which the world still knows me. In that same truck, I renounced all the articles of faith that had cradled me in sham

reassurance all those years, all 613 rules for being good and glad under the unblinking eye of Yahweh. This occurred at a truck stop near Lake George, after the whine of air brakes jolted me awake, and the driver put his tongue where I thought only toilet paper could go.

One should let himself be killed rather than violate this law. But I resisted dying. Yet being Jewish was all I knew. Could I just *let it all go*? I felt that first commandment, then the others, flutter out that 18-wheeler window, over the highway with its piles of sandy salt, and thence to the lake beyond, just a puff of sulfur. I used a blade from the trucker's tool box to amputate my *payos*. I Frisbeed my *yarmulke* off a railroad bridge while he hooted, into a stream of the Hudson—"A lily pad for some Protestant toad." He took me to a "greasy spoon" diner, my first non-kosher restaurant, where I ate chili and a chocolate malted. He gave me a hundred bucks and the phone number of his mother in Phoenix. He kissed me on the top of my head, said, "Brother, I think I could love you." His name was Dustin. It tickles still when I think of him.

By other tongues and numbers then, I found my way to Toronto, where I could avoid my kind without appearing overtly anti-Semitic. On the recommendation of an urchin I encountered at the bus depot, I hung around movie sets where I snagged free snacks from the catering truck by pretending to be an extra. I eventually got cast as an extra, "Boy Corpse 2." Soon, I started acting bit parts in real movies, until I became, at 24, a minor star. After a while, I fell for a gentle, intelligent *shiksa*, Elizabeth, a rich producer's daughter, and we had a child of our own. One day on a boat on Lake Ontario, I told her of my months on the road, and how I had allowed men to unleash that slavering animal Cain found crouched at the opening of his abyss. Elizabeth was all mercy and stone.

She gradually introduced me to my son Rainer, and my soul, hairless and shy inside me.

We had more. We moved to Hollywood with our little brood of Aryans, and Elizabeth's father set us up in a manor with a greenhouse for Elizabeth, and a large, detached garage, where I pretended to work on my obscenely expensive kit cars, but usually just lazed on a leather couch I kept there on the loft.

I paid back my father-in-law after my big-break, at 33, playing John the Baptist. In real life, there was never any religion in our house. No ancient bearded pederasts with swinging dicks building arks in the back yard. No sexy martyrs hanging from sinewy arms. No "flying spaghetti monsters."

We still live and work here. I'm 53, no longer a hunky lead, but a "character actor" now.

I haven't seen my brothers or sisters in all this time. My youngest brother, Elan, is unimaginably 40 this year. I usually assume they all think I'm dead, like our brother, Naftali. But other times, over excess Patrón on the loft, I wonder if just one of the remaining 11 somehow sneaks into a movie theater – or surely at least one other of them set loose that flock of commandments – and studies the face of that guy on the screen, the fire chief with cancer, or the sensitive Doctor Without Borders, he or she might realize it's *him* up there, the boy with whom they used to whip caterpillars by the riverside. The boy who sang "*Oseh Shalom*" with them on *Shabbos*, and tucked arkloads of stuffed animals under their chins before they fell asleep. Their twin-less brother, Avraham.

The *I* that is now *me*, the kid who sucked his first quick breaths underneath that trucker upstate, is a different human being. Thanks to a company I paid handsomely, my Wikipedia page says I was born in the Oregon woods to a Doris and Randolph D— . It doesn't mention I came from a religious cult like River Phoenix, and like millions of black hats before me. It doesn't mention a single sibling, no less 12. And it says nothing of that shed in the Catskills where my parents invited hell, and it broke through the crust.

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In my 30s, I became, as Elizabeth put it, "hot shit." Hollywood royalty, the magazines proclaimed. I had everything.

But I missed my twin. Alone at a hotel after the dailies and the parties and drugs, or exhausted in the garage loft, I missed his left nostril, which whistled, so I always knew he was asleep beside me.

There's a story my father told me and Naftali a thousand times in our bed. Of the two brothers in Jerusalem who farmed the opposite side of a quiet hilltop, "happy as pigs in shit" (our favorite part, when we both got to *oink*). Guilty at the imbalance between them, they secretly bolstered the other's crops. Caught in the act one night, the brothers hugged with utter gratitude for their generosity, weeping under the stars.

"This hill they farmed was called Mount Moriah," my father told us, and on the spot where those brothers embraced, *HaShem* commanded that King Solomon build the first Holy Temple, its bedrock consecrated in fraternity. Now we have one of our own, right here. "*Nu—Geh schlufen!*"

We told that story, our voices intermingling, to all our siblings, every time one got old enough.

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"Avraham and Naftali are thirteen," my father said to my mother. "There are terrible forces. Terrible things."

"What are you talking, Doctor Doom?"

"My brother was thirteen. Remember what happened to my brother."

"*Feh*."

What happened to my father's brother, Shmuly, is that someone left him hog-tied, naked, outside the Gold Mountain *Shul* in the rain. They'd hit him so hard, so many times in the *kishkas* with a part of a railway tie, that his organs ruptured. He bled internally while the men *davened* inside, while their wives cooked *cholent* and wiped tushies at home.

Can we fathom what my grandfather suffered that day, and is it any wonder?

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My son Rainer lost an eye when he was 11 months. That sounds like he accidently left it on a shelf next to the finger paints at day care, and some acquisitive kid snagged it. No, this story is about parental agency. Elizabeth slipped on boot-slush, and dropped a pot of boiling spaghetti. She contorted so far to try to spare him, her pelvis snapped like a pretzel. I was on set when the nanny called, crying so hard she retched. With her accent, I thought she said "Rainer *die*," not "Rainer's *eye*," and I felt some hidden hands in me grasp out frantically, trying to pull down those birds I had let fly from Dustin's truck as a child.

They changed the whole filming schedule to accommodate my crisis, fearing I might descend to my "place" again, where I'm useless on the human plane, and I lose the studio shit-tons of money.

The nanny stayed with the children, and I for once eschewed her offers to "relax" me. On the garage loft, I listened for my dead brother's whistling, but heard only the tick of the engine of the Cadillac SUV, worth double my childhood bungalow that housed 15, but which I got for free because I was good looking and excellent at pretending to be someone else.

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When my phantom Uncle Shmuly was killed, all the Jewish communities rallied. The Sullivan Sheriff, a *goy*, was nonetheless outraged at the "atrocity." There was a picture in the paper of him cradling my dead uncle. They got the names mixed-up in the paper, based on faulty eyewitness accounts. The caption said the dead boy was my father, Hillel Gold. They arrested a hobo near the railroad station, a few months before the train stopped coming through Mount Moriah. They said the man was "touched" by the war. But he insisted on his innocence, even to the chair. At the trial, he pointed to my grandparents.

"I seen these people," he said. "They ain't so pious. We all devils underneath our garb."

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"It's the shed," my mother always said. "You're getting drunk in there." Since he was young, my father drank, because of what happened to his brother, Shmuly. He drank wine and a shitty liqueur called *Moishe Shicker* – "Moshe the Drunk" – which all the bums in Brooklyn drank because it was cheap, strong, and kosher. To me, it smelled like iodine and fighting.

She had never been allowed in the shed.

"Listen, you're in charge of the *Dědek* under the stairs and the stove," he told her. "But in the shed ..."

"*What* in the shed?"

"It belongs to me." He bit his bottom lip.

She was convinced she was banned so he could get plastered, avoiding the chores that came from three children, eight children, 11, and finally, 13. She heard strange noises in there.

Once, before she died, his mother alluded to Hillel's father's preoccupation with his shed-time, too, on the property when it was new, especially after he lost he lost Shmuly.

"Boys will be *boychiks*," she said. "And we women are better off not knowing what they get up to when they're alone, *believe me*."

It was just as well. The shed gave my mother a terrible shudder whenever she got close.

"*Tsuris* in there," she declared. And she disallowed us kids from playing in its shadow—I mean we were literally not allowed in the shadow it cast on the scruffy lawn. In fact, she confided in me and Naftali that she fantasized that someone would come and "raze

to rubble that monstrosity of his." Maybe she could someday afford to pay Yitzy, the "light-retarded" gravedigger, to "accidentally" wipe it out with his little bulldozer thing. "Nice, Avi, right? It's the perfect crime!"

With God omnipresent and *maidels* developing on the horizon, I never thought much about the ramshackle shed with the sloped, tin roof. It was a small, one-storey wooden shack overcome by vines at the corner of the yard, surrounded on two sides by a high fence. Beside it stood a giant maple, with accusatory branches. One big dead branch touched the roof of the shed. She wished he would prune that branch. She *nudged* and nagged him.

"Take it down, would you, please?"

"Why do you care?"

"I care!"

Sometimes from the kitchen, she felt compelled to look up from the potatoes she peeled or the sippy cups she had to wash a thousand times a day. She thought she could see through the small, slatted window a bluish light inside the shed, shifting. Once, when she was putting up the laundry, she stayed very still for a long time and thought she could hear soft murmurs like she used to hear while waiting for her father at *shul*; yes, the disembodied sound of a man *davening* behind the walls. So she was shocked when he pulled up in his minivan a minute later with hot bagels.

"Do you have TV in there?" she said that night after dinner. Naftali and I were not supposed to be listening.

"What do I need from a television? We have our own Brady Bunch here!"

"I can see a light," she said, at length. He ate an entire cold *latke* with apple sauce, and wiped his beard. He took a swig from a bottle, and she warped her brows.

"It doesn't like the dark," he said, quietly, to no one in particular.

"The *shed*?"

"Why don't you act like a mother and put those fucking kids to bed!"

Another time, when he was off in Israel with his dying cousin, it rained on a cool morning, but she saw the droplets sizzle and hop on that roof. She didn't let us outside all weekend, and we got cabin fever.

A few months later, she heard whooping outside, and found the younger children snapping icicles off the dented gutters on the shed, and licking them, and swashbuckling.

"It's ninety degrees in August!" she said. She pulled them all inside and frightened the littlest ones with shrill admonitions.

"It just isn't right, *kineahora*!" she said, as I poured her some of my father's better brandy, and my brother, Mendy, curled around her feet and cried.

She paced in her big slippers.

"There's something in there all right," she said, once the other kids got off to school. She kept me home that day. She curled my *payos* around my ears. "Avi, listen to your mother. *None* of you … It's bad in there," she said.

"Yes, *Mommy*." She shook me. "*Mommy—yes*! OK, OK," I said.

So I started to watch the shed before school, and when I got home, I positioned myself on a picnic table where I studied in sight of its walls. Barn owls nested in the eaves. My father sometimes came and went, bedraggled. He tousled my hair as he passed, or he

ignored me, muttering. He'd always been known as a goofball, my mother told me, a declaration I found as hard to believe as Goliath with his one fat eye.

"Really," she said. "In *yeshiva*, he was always being the clown. Until—" But she only tsk-tsk'd.

Until Uncle Shmuly, I thought, proud of how smart I was. I was stupid.

One summer day, my mother and I both saw my father taking a full bowl of water out the back door.

"Are you keeping a *dog* in there now?" she asked.

"A dog? A *gilgul*! Not so kosher," he told her. But sure enough, into the shed he went with the water, and we never saw that bowl again, her second favorite bowl for chopped liver.

I watched her the following spring drive herself insane about that big, dead branch again. For weeks, she pestered him, but he just shrugged.

"I don't have better things to do?"

"Like what do you have to do?"

Then one *Shabbos* eve, she left two bottles of *Moishe Shicker* for him on the table. On Sunday, she shut their bedroom door while he groaned, a hot water bottle on his head, and cotton in his ears. She hiked up her *schmatte*, and stood at the end of the driveway for an hour. She stopped Yitzy when he bumped by on his tractor on the way to bury someone, stupidly smiling. He chopped the maple it into pieces, and made a stack by the mailbox taller than me and Naftali. When he woke up, my father bitched about the racket. She pointed out the window. He pinched his nose.

He said, "Please tell me, Frumie, that no one went inside the shed."

"Don't be a *schmuck*," she said. "Here's five Tylenols."

Waiting for school the next day, I discovered buds in every shade of green blooming on those long-dead logs.

In the shed that night, I heard my father say a little prayer in a language that wasn't Hebrew or Yiddish.

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Hiking one day in Topanga Canyon, Rainer told me he wanted a right eye that looked and worked as intended. "We're rich and famous," he said. There was a clinic in San Francisco, Elizabeth had told me. They could never make it see again, but they could replace it with something that *looked like it saw*. "The junior prom," she reminded me. "His wedding night."

"Rushing things a mite," I said.

"It's right around the corner."

I confess it still sickened me to see that eye. Doctors called it "milky." It was Strawberry Quik.

He said I should do a movie in Transylvania.

"I'd be scared," I said.

"Vampires? You have to *invite* them in," he said. "Otherwise, they just wander around outside, like, moaning and stuff."

My father's parents were Czech. They lived in Brooklyn after the war, with the zillion other Jews. But some of my grandfather's landsmen were talking about a place upstate, "in *da* mountains" of Sullivan County, where they could build a *shul* and some nice-looking cabins, and escape the craziness of the City – the *shvartzers*, my mother translated – for the summers. My *zayde*, Aaron, had made a lot of money in the louvered door business, and he agreed to finance the building of the Gold Mountain *Shul*. All winter, they sent up emissaries with my grandfather at the helm, to test the waters and finally buy land. Then all together, 117 *Hasids* took the O & W northwest on a warm Sunday afternoon in May, and started cutting pines and rafting blue stone that Monday. By July, they had a messy little *shtetl* underneath the Shawangunks. They called it Mount Moriah.

My father was conceived, if not born, there. And he spent all the summers of his youth there beside the Neversink, catching tadpoles and baby eels with his brothers and sisters, as his children would a generation later.

The summer after Shmuly's murder, though, the Golds did not return. The bungalow fell into disrepair. But then my father decided to repair and expand it for his own growing *mishpoche*. After our third summer there, when Naftali and I were five and my sister Rochel was born, he told my mother we were moving up "to *da* mountains" for good.

"There's hardly a store up there!"

"We'll bring stuff from Williamsburg."

"But everyone goes home before *Rosh Hashanah*."

"We'll be pioneers, Frumie. I promise we'll be looked after."

I suppose that meshuggeneh *shed of his will look after us*, she thought (I think), thinking she was smart. She was stupid. And sure enough, soon after we moved, my mother understood our move was not about *da mountains* or the bungalow per se, but the shed.

"He's got some cabal going in there with the crickets, like Renfield," she said to me and Naftali while we watched her make the *matzo* balls, unable to keep her eyes from drifting out the kitchen window. "He's planning the overthrow of the Pharaoh."

This was when she used to sometimes joke about the shed.

Before Naftali went in there.

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Cosmic torpor. Elizabeth had to take Rainer up the coast without me. I knew I should be with my son for the consultation, the surgery. In fact, it was I who'd pre-nicknamed his new eye the Mile Stone. The *pièce de résistance*. "Awesome!" he declared. But I couldn't motivate my bones from the leather couch on the garage loft, the whiff of gasoline and the nanny in my nose, and the ghost of my brother Naftali's septum lulling me to sleep.

"It's not so very extra terrible," said the nanny in her Carpathian burr, wiping her chin. "You've had so many few weekends off this year, you need to stay here in your sanctum." In Elizabeth's most generous moods, she'd have never used that word.

"I'll never forgive you for this," said Elizabeth from the cell phone on my pillow. "The procedure's over, and the fitting's on Friday. You better be there."

"I don't think it's working anymore."

"Our marriage? No shit."

"My therapy."

"You *think*!? And those drugs. They might as well be M&Ms."

I couldn't sleep. And then I dreamt I was Naftali, and it was Avi who'd gone to the shed. I could hear my nostril whistling.

That night, I awoke from a most elemental reverie like that first hungry tongue my mother led me to. I asked the nanny to deliver to the room three bottles of Evian because the sink above the shitter seemed inapt. The terrestrial, I garnered myself with my daughter's toy shovel in several predawn trips around Elizabeth's radish plants outside the greenhouse. Although I had not seen Hillel Gold in several decades, I never forgot his voice, that prayer.

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"It's time."

"Time for what now, Hilly?"

"I told you. Before we were married. Remember? We got thirteen children now, Frumie."

"It's a sin, such talk." But she remembered. She had labored her absolute hardest to forget, a skill she'd mastered from her mother, who'd learned it from hers, all the way back to the Garden. Although the tone of it, and his contorted face, had horrified her back then, she managed somehow to chalk it up to Hilly's youthful madness, the *mishegoss* of his falling for her, his *boychick* hormones, and his brother Shmuly's *shanda*. Her mother had warned

her that boys were not normal. They said things. They *had things hidden* where girls had no things.

She remembered. That time, at Camp *Simcha* on the Basha Kill – not far from Mount Moriah – when they were not supposed to see each other, but elaborately lied to their respective counselors, and spent the whole weekend in a tent near the water, telling stories, learning to kiss. He told her all about the famous Golem in Prague, about which his father had held him and his brothers in thrall before they had to put him away and pretend he never was. "We'll always be protected, Hilly," he'd said. "From the mud came Adam, and with a prayer and a kiss, he was the father of us all. And from the mud comes others, too, maybe not always so fatherly, right? We give the breath of bones, but only when we need it most."

And late at night, with muddy boots and breath fruity from Malaga wine he'd swiped from the *Shabbos* booty, Hilly Gold told Frumie Fein of his brother, Samuel – Shmuly – how it was so cold in the rain that day that his little *pippick* had shrunk up inside him, and how that embarrassed Hilly so much, for what it might have said about him, Shmuly's closest brother. He wept. She held him in the tent. Something stirred, and she was certain it would be her lot to love this person, Hillel Dovid Gold, that he would always be this little *boychick* like an eyeball left on a windy ridge, and she would have to make herself a tree, a cliffside to surround and to protect him like Rabbi Löw's monster protected that girl.

"You'll marry me," he said the next morning, while they dangled their feet off a dock, and touched toes amid the cardinal flowers. "And we'll have lots of *kinderlach*." She leaned her head on his shoulder, which seemed a natural stance. What could this boy have hiding,

and where? He didn't even have any skin. A frog plopped in the water. "And one will go to be brothers with my brother, Shmuly."

She didn't know what he meant by that. He was always acting a fool, her friends had told her. She watched the water-skimmers cut through scum, and a far-off loon picking little fishes out of mire. She was afraid to lift her head.

But he shifted and looked at her. "That's the deal," he told her. "You gotta promise. You get me, and you get all a whole *shissel* of kids. But you have to give up one. And I'll give you *everything else*, forever."

Their last night out there on the kill, the wind whipped against the canvas, and he held her close, and touched her places with his bitten fingernails. And at her urging, she saw that one thing he had hidden, a thing indeed and a commandment she had never seen, having helped rear three sisters and no boys. It was not shrunken up at all, she told him, and that observation lifted his bottom-heavy soul for many years, like a great blue heron taking off out of the wetlands.

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Now he was making good on his promise.

"There were *twelve* tribes, Frumie. Ten of them were lost," he said. "We have thirteen. And we need to choose only a single *one*."

"*Geh schlufen*!" She put down the sock she was sewing. "You're drunk."

"You have to pick one," he said.

She pulled the blanket over Elan's toes. She walked calmly up to her husband, who was standing, wavering, by the window, out of which she could see that *fucking* shed. She smacked him hard. His beard muffled the sound, but she knew it was hard because his *yarmulke* flipped up from the bobby-pin, and he grabbed his cheek. "I'll kill you first where you stand," she said.

He tried to hug her. She wouldn't let him. He stood there looking dumb and helpless and drunk, and she looked like she almost felt sorry for him and his brother with the shrunken up thing in the rain and his heinie-hole showing in between his tied-up legs.

"Listen to me. I don't think you're well, Mister. I think you're damaged goods. From the get-go, you're broken." She looked up at the ceiling and shouted, "Where can I return this broken man!?"

He smoothed down his *kippa*. "This isn't coming from me," he said, seeming sober.

"Then who? WHO!?" Her voice woke the baby, Elan.

"Go ahead and see who," he said. "Go ahead and ask for yourself who wants another Gold." He held his hand out in invitation to the back screen door. She knew he was telling her to go into the shed. She looked like she'd just swallowed a huge slug of freezing-cold seltzer. Her eyes told that she was completely certain at this point that he'd gone as mad as his father. All her former fear burned off like fog in August, and she swung open the back door. If he was testing her, she was passing. She marched across the dewy lawn, in the back yard for the first time in her life without her *sheitel*. She stepped into the shadow, but didn't shiver. The owls complained when she got near, and still she went forward. She heard the baby crying in the house, and a long way off, some of the other children, a girl and

two boys (Avi Gold was one) playing down the hill by the river, whipping sticks at inch worms.

The first thing she smelled when she opened the shed door was soil. Then a little static charge. She felt as though she were mixed-dancing, or leaping in her beige slip from the balcony into the black sea of men at *shul*, touching all of them at once, revealing all they had hiding under the black. With a secret incantation, someone – her husband, would you believe – had finally brought her to life at age 36, powerful and looming, crushing enemies like roaches on the cobblestones of Prague. She shut the door of the shed behind her. Inside it was all blue.

In the bungalow, my father pulled his beard. He touched the baby. He put a book away on the shelf. He poured himself a glass of elderberry Manischewitz in the only glass not dirty in the sink—the bronze Elijah cup my mother kept in a corner cabinet on a little doily she sewed while Naftali and I were embracing, waiting to be born.

She was back in half an hour.

She looked small. All the blood had drained from her face, and her eyes were dull. And this is what she said: "Take Naftali. Do it fast. The other one I want to keep."

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"Mr. D—?! What's going on in there?" The nanny. "You have some kind of heart attack?"

Banging. Wrenching. No way in.

"We're good in here," we say.

We.

She backs away. We see her. A little blue light slides out from under the crack of the door and over her toes.

Slowly, we rise. We see through the shutter slats the Caddy pull through the gate and up the driveway. We see the boy jump out and run toward the garage while his mother tends to the luggage with the nanny's help. His mother's unhappy that someone's been rooting in her garden. The boy's eager to show off his new baby blues, his Mile Stone, and we can't wait to see it. We watch him run around the back. We've been making something for him on the floor of the loft, and we're dying to show him. We wait while he bounds up the stairs, two at a time. And when the boy – our beautiful, two-eyed boy – finds the door locked, placidly we unlatch it, and we invite him into our blue shifting light.