

THE JEWISH GIANT

I was born with a pituitary tumor. The doctors discovered it when I was ten years old, but couldn't operate until after puberty. At twelve, when I was sent away to the Stapleton School, I was six-foot-four; by mid-adolescence, nearly seven feet. Fugitive growth, nothing in this world built to my scale. I broke something precious of my father's nearly every week: shattering his glass-blown dolphin, smashing the crystal of his pocketwatch with enormous thumbs when I snapped closed its gold case. I would have kept on growing until the process itself killed me. Thanks to my operation at sixteen, I survived. A frail giant.

Perhaps that's how Simon Downing saw me. His persecution shamed me, made me believe people were going to make fun of me, had a right to, but also taught me that my life was different than most people's. Essentially my own. My height was an opening, to see what others would reveal to me.

As a boy, I believed in the dark, Jewish God, *El N'kamott*, God of vengeance. He taught me that if you pity the guilty, you will harm the innocent. Truth, fact, faith, belief, were all one, and this, my comfort. *El N'kamott* was a living God, not an old, white-bearded face floating in a cloud: He had a bald head, rough-hewn features like weathered stone, steel eyes. My God was small and lithe with the impatience of the very lean. At night, He appeared to me and spoke, raising the hair on my forearms, a voice with the force of an undertow. *Noah Avrim Levinson, your day will come.* Of course, I had no idea what He meant. His vagueness, too, was my comfort.

I arrived at the Stapleton School an orphan. My mother died when I was two. I have no memory of her, just a few bare facts: her name was Alma, she sewed exquisite costumes for wealthy people

and their dolls, she was tall, with black hair, dark eyes, and slender hands. My father raised me in a small town outside Philadelphia until I was twelve. He was a survivor of Auschwitz and developed a bad heart there. When he was physically ill, he was lucid. When he was well, his mind went. Father's temperament was changeable as weather, but with me, he was always gentle and kind, mixed with unexpected flashes of humour. Late in life, he became religious, but this only added to his suffering. He was a man who saw the light passing through his blown-glass dolphin, the shimmering rainbow it cast on the wall, the black shadow, too.

Father was trained as a physician in Prague, but never practiced. After the war, he worked briefly as a medical illustrator, but could not draw from life. While in the sanatorium, he did his own illustrations – marvelous bodies, figures, and animals with wings and scales like coloured glass – these were published in a book after his death. My Uncle Axel, by then a British citizen, became my guardian.

Uncle Axel sent me away at once to the Stapleton School, outside Oxford. I clutched the steel box – my father's old Army medical kit – containing the finger puppets I'd come to call the Bloodkin. My father had made them for me when I was small, with clay heads and hand-painted faces, clothing them in old doll's costumes my mother had sewn. They were my favourite toys, the only ones that grew with me.

There were five Bloodkin. I liked the way they fit snugly over my fingers and became part of me while retaining their own personalities, five that could easily become fifty. That first school day, I clutched their steel box tightly under one arm, carried it like something living, afraid – as if entering prison – of being stripped of all personal belongings.

We entered a parlour smelling of freshly polished floors, leather, and damp flannel. The headmaster poured my uncle a glass of sherry, which he set on the mantelpiece, untasted. Uncle Axel stood behind me and reached up to grip my shoulders, kneading the slouching muscles until I stood straight. Then he vanished.

Boys stood in clusters, trading prize marbles, showing off card tricks, playing board games, but I took them in as I would a scene out a car window. At the far end of the room, by the trophy case, was another boy. He held me: his staunch look, his outrageous carrot-coloured hair, the fact that he held an army medical kit, a near twin of mine.

He swung it from hand to hand, each time nearly letting the steel box crash to the floor, its contents clattering above the muted voices of the homesick boys.

This boy strode over. Built short and thick as a fireplug, he had a great walk, springing on the balls of his feet like a prizefighter. Being ungainly, I envied his physical assurance. Back then, I was ghostly pale, with long brittle bones and barely skin to cover them.

Reaching for my box, the boy said, "Hey, Frank, give over."

"My name's not Frank." I clutched my box more tightly.

"Sure it's Frank."

His naming unnerved me. I was like Frankenstein, a monstrous body, inert, awaiting the spark of life. The boy ran a hand through his red porcupine hair, his eyes narrow, bottle green.

He put out his hand. "Downing," he said, then shook his box hard. The housemaster shot him a look, pure poison, and Down just smiled. He had a warm, open grin, regular white teeth. Mine were grey-tinged from antibiotics and made me feel rotten to the core; I kept my lips sealed.

"What you got, Frank?" He tipped his head at my box, then pounded his fist down on it, so the kit fell to the floor, the Bloodkin scattering about my feet. "Frank's dolls," he whispered loudly, as if on stage. I knelt and picked up my puppets.

"Know what I've got?" he asked, tapping his box.

"Who cares?" My curiosity grew.

"*You* do." He rattled his box harder. "Bones," he said. "Bird bones. Birds I've snagged with my bare hands." He balanced the steel box expertly between the crook of his elbows, laying his palms open. "I have a way." He demonstrated the sharp twist, like

opening a too-tight cap. "That quick. I have a taste for swallows." He shrugged, modest.

Whether what Down said was true or a tale barely mattered: it had the force of his will behind it.

We were shown to our dorm by the housemaster. It was in a huge, decaying mansion with a Latin phrase engraved above the doorway; I hadn't a clue what it meant. (The headmaster had already informed me that I would be relegated to a Latin class with eight-year-old boys.) I was at the back of the group, Down a few steps ahead, when he barred my way.

"Crawl in."

I stretched up to my full height. Stepping into the entry, I fell to hands and knees to the sound of his low, monochromatic laugh. Turning around, I saw the tripwire he had rigged while I was downstairs: a gossamer-thin thread.

Down had the bed next to mine, our names on stickers taped to the end of each iron rail. I tried one position, then another, my feet dangling well over the edge, the cold metal press of the bedrail against my calves. Down watched me toss and turn; I remember his words, *Night, ugly girl*, whispered just before he fell asleep.

At our first tea, the boys chanted grace, words mouthed of meaning. I sat silent, missing my father, homesick for a home I no longer had, as servers set out bowls of aphid-seasoned salad and plates of mystery meat and Down hectored me to *say Grace, Grace Frank, or die*.

I stared at the food in total disbelief. "What's that?" I asked anyone who'd listen.

"Toad-in-the-hole," someone said; it was a decent fellow called Mallory.

On closer inspection, this toad looked like rancid sausage embedded in a baked yellow-brown batter. "And that?" I pointed to a small side dish containing a speckled mess.

"Spotted dick," Down said.

This was suet pudding covered in a gelatinous white sauce with raisins dotted all over it. Some boys poured a warm yellow custard on top; Down and Mallory poured the custard over everything.

I escaped to the bathroom. By the time I got back, there was a cover over my plate. When I lifted it, I found a blood-brown piece of flesh, steaming in its own juice.

“Le coeur de chat,” Down said. “Chef’s special.”

My stomach heaved as the other boys roared with laughter and Down sang out: “Cat’s heart, makes Frank fart. Eat all of it. Then shit, shit, shit.”

I shoved the bowl at Down, its contents splattering into his lap. Lunging across the long wood table, he forced my head down; my face pressed into the tableboards, my nose flattened against the grain: his puppet. A moment later, there were the voices of the masters. One took Down away for six of the best I was sent back to my dorm.

I sat on my cot, wondering how Down intuited my fears. Cats, for one, how they slink up too close, barely noticed, then rub up and down one’s bare leg; sensing discomfort, they take pleasure in witnessing one chafe, then pounce with sharp teeth and claws, all of their movements unexpected. Yet cats are beautiful creatures with their sudden grace, marble eyes, and electric fur. Sublime. Cool in a pinch.

The next day, and in the days that followed, Down stalked me from chapel to meals to mail call, from games to bun break, even out on runs and field trips. Neither insider nor outsider, Down was caught between: a Catholic in a sea of Anglicans; part Scottish, part Welsh, in a school of blue-blooded English. Fatherless, with a mysterious mother rumoured to be insane one day, lewd the next, both on a rainy, bored Saturday. The other boys called him bastard, said his mother had the clap *and* syphilis, that he was destined to go mad, that he’d gotten a dose in the womb.

When Down passed boys he wanted to impress, his taunting of me escalated, boys who let him in, then shut him out: Wilson, the brawny Captain of the Eight, Marksby, the best debater. Down

drew their attention with his burlesque. He was a genius at ambush, setting traps for me, and I was often laid up in the San.

Down visited me there at odd hours, and when the nurse was out of sight, he would look at me, just look, his gaze free of judgment. Some days he actually brought me treats: a chocolate bar, a hand warmer, a killer conker, radiator-dried all winter, its middle hollowed and filled with hardened glue. After, Down always asked to see the Bloodkin. Once, I took them out and set each man down on the small, hard cot. Down took out his kit, too, upending it on the bed so the spindly white bones fell about the Bloodkin. There *were* bones in there and Down set about forming a group into a bridge, another made a gate, a third clustered into a wood fire. Once we tired of the game, Down reached out and stroked my face, as if reading my features.

His hands had a smell, cool and dry as pine, except when he couldn't get to sleep and took out the bottle of his Mum's perfume that he kept concealed inside his tuck box, and dabbed a touch on his wrist, so she'd be near to him all night long.

In the morning, we pretended things were just as they'd been. Only Down was crueler. I wondered if I'd imagined that moment of gentleness, the tenderness in his hands; it had the quality of a deeply pleasurable dream, vanishing, then reappearing like silverfish. My real dreams were of weightlessness, of flying, of grace.

I startled awake from a flying dream the night Nigel Weber arrived at school: in the middle of the term, the middle of the night. Soaring above the clouds, I careened to earth. To calm myself, I took out the Bloodkin and played with them under the covers lit by my flashlight. Just then, I heard the sudden whisper of the housemaster as he led a new boy into the dorm by the hand.

He was a small, shrunken thing, with wide, dark eyes that glistened in the amber light that fell in from the hall. The housemaster settled him in the cot nearest the door, next to mine.

I glanced at Down; he lay in a deep sleep on my other side, his mouth loose, arms flung upward.

After the housemaster left, the boy turned to me and said, "Let's see," his voice thin and clear, wavering at its edges. He reached over and lifted the covers, then slid over and sat cross-legged at the foot of my bed. From the pocket of his baggy pajamas, he took out a penlight and clicked it on. His face was heart-shaped with large, pointy ears, like an elf. He said his name was Weber.

I unearthed the Bloodkin one by one. While Web studied each man, I studied him: nearly bald, with pale tufts of hair, patches of scalp showing through. He had very white skin, visible branchings of veins, and the boniest ankles I'd ever seen. His ears had down on them like rabbit's fur, which made him look like a soft, fuzzy-felt animal.

"There are two kingdoms," he said, naming them the way Down had named me. "Mountlantis, a mountain range under the sea. Big and high as the Rockies in America. Gloudseah," he went on. "That's an island floating in the sky." Two of the Bloodkin were from Mountlantis, he explained, one from Gloudseah. Only the last pair moved between both worlds: Web named them Nye and No.

We heard the housemaster walking the halls and I put the Bloodkin back in their box, snapping the lid shut. Web went to sleep. I listened for a long while to the gentle gusts of his breath, then glanced at Down on my other side, feeling a twinge of disloyalty.

Some time later, I heard an outcry, a high staccato wail. Web rolled to the floor between our beds. His eyelids fluttered, he murmured unintelligible sounds; his body thrashed, convulsing; his head banged down on the floor, while his limbs contracted and released. I jumped from my cot, put my pillow under his head, and loosened his top, which was constricting his neck. Then I rolled Web onto his side, as everything inside him spewed forth.

After, I held him, as my father had once held me. Web's skin smelled both sour and sweet, new.

The other boys woke up and were staring at us; no one said a word. Mr Worrel, the housemaster who slept like a stone on the top floor of the old house, was nowhere about. Down threatened to get him, then he said, "Doesn't belong here," his voice clotted thick. "He won't make it."

To get away from Down, I led Web into the bathroom and washed him clean. There was blood on his lips and cheek, already drying to a brownish paste. I'd never taken care of anyone before, not even my father, but I wanted to look after Web.

When we returned, the other boys were gathered around Web's bed, whispering. Both Mr Worrel, looking bleary-eyed and dizzy, and a matron called Fiona, were there too. Fiona shepherded Web to the San.

He was back with us the very next day, for little could be done for him. The seizures would come in their lawless paroxysms, despite medication. However, a strange thing happened between us. After that first seizure I experienced an aura – sensed Web's fit coming the way one smells a rain. It didn't matter whether I was asleep or awake, the warning came. A fuzzy black shape bled into my line of vision and grew until it enclosed my whole visual field, then the shape shattered into halves, scintillating along the zig-zagged edge. I knew then to go to Web. By the time he needed me, I could see clear.

Watching the inner volcano erupt inside him, a strange power took shape within me. I was released by the seizures; I began in an odd and perverse way to need them. Web's fits usually lasted only a few minutes, and afterward, he fell into a deep sleep. Once the dorm had settled, I climbed into his bed and held him, stroking his soft, tufted hair, shaping it around his ear.

Soon Web and I found a secret place: a fir at the edge of school grounds, partway into the woods. Our tree had brambling, low-

lying branches, and beneath them a bed of needles weathered into soft mulch, a cool, dark den to hide out in and play.

Web owned a Swiss Army knife, which he carried on a cord attached to his jacket. He carved winged creatures for Gloudseah and molded birdfish for Mountlantis. Eyes to the ground, we spotted the spiked balls of horse-chestnuts, a quartz crystal, old beer bottles filled with rainwater, things we incorporated into the world of the Bloodkin. The hockey rink was a glacier, Web's cloggy shoes were rescue boats, ordinary tennis balls became missiles. The yellow walls of Latin class melted into liquid sun that kept Mountlantians warm, the clots of fog that hung above the rugby fields composed the veil that protected Gloudseah from earth. Together, we made up a quest for the Bloodkin with riddling clues and internecine rules: The kinsman who completed our perilous journey gained the power to see inside opaque surfaces – mud, minds, rock, clouds. . . .

Before long, Down discovered our cave and carved obscenities in the dirt with a sharpened stick. He laid the mulchy bed with nails and fouled the earth with excrement. As we cleaned up after his ravages, I dreamed of getting him back: grinding his bird bones into powder with mortar and pestle, smashing that secret bottle of his mother's scent.

The first night of half-term break, there were just a few boys left in the dorm. Sometime near dawn, Web had a terrible seizure, his longest and most violent ever. I rushed to him, placed a pillow under his head, shoving objects out of his way. From the corner of my eye, I saw Down scramble onto my cot and reach under the covers. He snatched the smallest kinsman – Nye – who barely fit over my pinkie. Then Down grabbed my arms, wringing them around my back, twisting as hard as he could. I watched Web, but could do nothing for him. He was lost, haunted.

Down whispered, "Noah, let him go." It was the first time he'd ever called me by my real name. He held my arms fast.

Swerving around me, Down straddled Web, thrusting the smallest finger puppet down Web's throat. I fought Down, as Web struggled. Freed, I found the space below Web's ribs and gave sharp, upward thrusts with the heels of my hands. There was a horrible choke and rasp as Web gulped then swallowed. I saw the shape of the puppet bulge against his pale throat and go down. Nye was Web's favourite kinsman, one of the pair who navigated between both worlds.

When I caught my breath, the few remaining boys were gathered around us. Mr Worrel separated Down and me. I looked at Down across the room. In his eyes was a contraction of light, then dark, and I saw my father's flinch when it was just me, reaching for a glass, or his arm, a look I hated and pitied more than the one that followed, an impenetrable glaze, when my father went to a place where I couldn't find him. Down bowed his head.

The next morning I left for Uncle Axel's, while Down and Web remained at school for half-term break. Web's father, a diplomat, was in Singapore, while Down's mother was ill and staying with her sister, where Down was not welcome.

I had been at my uncle's for three days when the aura seeped into my dreams, its shape darkening the sky, clouds, and reeling stars I'd seen so vividly, until I clambered to the edge of sleep and rushed to Web, only to find myself alone, in a strange and unwelcome place.

I got back to school the tail-end of break, a cold blustery day with snow slanting down. I remember the dry heat in the dorm, the stale smell of the radiator, its gravelly bursts, all of the metal cots neatly made, but for two: Down's, which was piled with dirty clothes, and Web's, its mattress stripped and discoloured by a stain. His tuck box was empty, its padlock cut apart; the metal door of his locker was flung open, his belongings were gone.

I ran through the snow to our cave, carrying the steel box containing the Bloodkin. Snow covered the buildings, the playing

fields, the woods and sky, everything blanched and smoothed of its own form and colour. I kneeled on the floor of the cave, looking for any sign of Web: his knife, coat, then felt Down's arm on my shoulder.

"Hey," he said. Web's knife hung around his neck, motionless, the knife that had whittled creatures for the Bloodkin, shaped toy trees and kayaks, sharpened spears from still-green branches.

"Where's Web?" I asked.

"Gone."

I shook his hunched shoulders. "Gone *where?*"

Down looked away, and I realized he was crying, first into his hands, then openly. I turned him toward me, but Down wouldn't look at me. Instead, he reached into his shirt pocket and handed me a note. Immediately, I recognized Web's writing paper, the thick cream-coloured stationary with his name engraved at the top. I unfolded the note and saw Web's handwriting, the shaky black letters forming one word: *Enough*, and his signature.

"I did it," Down said. "This time, really. Noah, you're the only one I can tell." In his eyes was that awful flinch and I wondered how one person becomes another. "You know the pills I've got?" He went on. "The death-sleepers?"

I nodded. Down had stolen Seconal from his mother's purse and kept the bottle concealed inside his tuck box. I knew he took a half-tablet now and then to get him through the night.

"Web had a bad one, this last," Down said in a soft, flat voice. "Messed himself. Web knew where to find the sleepers," he went on. "I made them handy. Told Web they were ready, waiting for him."

I held onto the steel box containing the Bloodkin, imagining Web going through his last seizure, wetting his bed, the warm urine flowing down his legs and dampening the sheets. Web drags the sodden sheets to the bathroom, tries to wash them out in the sink. Water everywhere now, the sheets drenched, waking Down with the sound of it running. Down is beside Web, taunting, threatening to tell, *they'll give you the plastic one. Everytime you*

move, it'll crackle. Everyone'll know, the whole house, the whole school. . . .

"I told him you were off," Down said. "Gone for good."

I felt it coming up again, Down's eerie one-note laugh and lunged at him before the sound escaped, backing him up against the tree, one hand spanning the width of his head, the other around his throat, imagining the thin birds' necks twisted, as my hands squeezed, their spindly crack; small branches breaking, trees crashing to wet ground, insects seething inside stumps; ants and spiders on their bellies, some with poison lances, others skittering helpless, the devouring and devoured, utter stillness at their center; blackness filling my old room, my father's footsteps coming into the yard, up the steps, closing the gate, the contraction of light in his eyes, fiery and forlorn – looking right at me – and something turned within me, loosening.

Down dropped his head against my chest, heavy as a stone, and I remembered being on holiday with my father in Maine, just before his death. We stood together on the cliffs of Pemaquid Point hurling rocks into the curling waves. "Come," my father said to me, "let's throw away what we don't need." He crouched, picking up a small stone. "I throw away confusion!" he called out, the stone spinning and landing soundlessly. "Go on, Noah. Something you want to get rid of," he coaxed.

I pried a fist-sized rock from the sandy crag and felt the sharp weight of it in my palm.

"I say goodbye to –"

"Shame." My father spoke for me.

"Gravity!" I tossed the rock underhand and it made a barely perceptible plop as it landed, a silvery splash. We went on like that until we'd hurled two handfuls of rocks into the dark, swirling water below, and then my father made his way down for a swim.

The sky was high and light, the wind billowing, as if washing it. I played on the cliffs by myself and when I looked down, I saw my father riding a wave, his body curling in on itself, tossed and hurled, pulled out to sea, then sucked back on shore, and before

the unbearable loss closed in, I wondered how the water must have felt to him as his heart gave out, barely there, like the fluids of his own body, as he floated and bobbed, an organ in the bloodsea.

I sat down on the cold, hard ground of our cave, under the low-lying pine branches. Scratching with my nails, I tried to dig a hollow for the Bloodkin, for I was through with them. But the ground was rock solid, I barely made a dent.

Down slipped Web's knife over his head, opened the blade and dug into the frozen earth, making a small hollow; gently, he laid out the four puppets that remained. We filled our arms with new snow, sweeping it over the Bloodkin in thin powdery layers, tamping it down until all were covered. Filling my hands again, I tasted the new powder, letting the white dust melt against my tongue.

Walking back to the dorm, the sky turned from blue to black, lowering in around us, and I swung my medical kit from loose fingers, empty as air.