

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

My Dead Brother Comes to America

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Alexander Godin, the pen name of Joseph Katz (1909–70) was a Ukrainian who immigrated to the United States with his family in 1922. We know little about his life. His short story “My Dead Brother Comes to America” was published in 1934 and included as part of The Best Short Stories of the Century. Written at a time of large European immigration to the United States, the story highlights the arrival of immigrants to America through Ellis Island to reunite with their father, in the process disclosing the hardships the immigrants faced in the “Old World” and in coming to the New.

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What do we learn about the lives of these immigrants before they set out for America? What did they have to endure about ship and upon arrival at Ellis Island? Why is nothing said about the dead brother when the family is reunited? What enables the family to become “aware of the return of the dead boy into our shattered lives?” More generally, what makes it possible for immigrants to integrate the soul-crushing experiences they had in their native land with their new (and often difficult) American life in an alien land? What is the meaning of the title of the story? In what sense—in what way—does the dead brother come to America?

When we arrived in New York Bay it was already winter, and the ground was covered with a hard brittle coat of snow. The whole harbor, as far as our eyes could reach, seemed to have been enameled with one vigorous sweep of the brush: standing on the deck, the sun high overhead, it hurt our eyes to look upon so much whiteness.

Near us the water was green and transparent, and farther away it was very blue and seemed dirty. The tugboats maneuvered noisily about our ship, belched smoke from their chimneys, and sent soot flying up the deck and into our faces. It was foggy in the bay, and other boats roared distractingly.

As the city came to meet us, as the greyness of its aspect became greyer still, and its skyscrapers towered all the time higher and higher above us, we felt small, frightened, cowed. The New World breathed a chill upon us and this chill, we felt, was not due entirely to the season.

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When the ship came as near to the shore as it could, the tugboats disengaged themselves and steamed quickly out of the way; afterwards there was a rattling of rusty chains, the huge anchor hit the water with a booming sound, sending spray in all directions.

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There were shouts from the water below: small boats drew up alongside the ship, and their occupants tried to attract the attention of the immigrants on board. These shouts were followed by frantic yells of recognition on both sides, and a package containing oranges was hurled up from below; the paper tore and the oranges went rolling over the deck, pursued by screaming women and children. Other packages were aimed too low and fell back into the water with a splash, and the occupants of the small boats instinctively covered their faces with their hands.

A shout, followed by another, calling my mother's name. It was shrill and seemed to come from far off. We all crowded to the railing of the ship, but my mother was the only one who could look over it and into the water below. My oldest sister was fourteen, I was thirteen, and the youngest girl was nine; but our hard life had left us too short and thin for our ages.

We climbed the railing till our knees touched the topmost beam, and we could see the skyscrapers and all the rest of the harbor hanging head downward in the water. But mother was too moved, too agitated to take care we should not fall overboard. She waved, and we followed the sweep of her hand; we strained our eyes.

It was father.

I was the first of the children to recognize him and, with an unhappy instinct, tried to gauge my feelings towards him. He had left me a five year old child, and now I was a growing boy. But this moment did not have the same meaning for me that it had for the others.

My oldest sister was wild with joy, and cried freely; she remembered the good side of father because he had been kinder to her than to all the rest. I remembered nothing but a child's bitterness and frustration and pain. The youngest child was still in the cradle when he had sailed, and now she tugged mother by the sleeve and said:

“Which one is *my* father, mother?”

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While the remains of my dead brother were rotting somewhere beneath a low mound across the sea. The earth which covered the mound was hard and cold and the young aspens shook in the wind, helplessly.

He had died so suddenly, and his very old and wise eyes had looked up to us at the moment of death and had seemed to say: “I know I am going to die; you need not trouble. It is useless to cry over such a trifle as death!”

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Eight years had passed since father sailed to America. My brother, who came after me, had died during the War. But either through negligence or fear, mother had all the time kept father in the dark about my brother’s death.

We had lived through a heroic period of history without having anything of the heroic in our natures, and many things had happened to us during that time. Our lives had been broken into many shards and, standing there, I felt we should never be able to piece those shards together again. And the uselessness of it all could not break my indifferent heart: nothing, I felt, could ever break my heart again as the death of my only brother had left it broken, the first and most terrible death I had ever witnessed.

They told me afterwards that I had wept as if my whole world had collapsed; and I believed them. They told me, too, that I had torn my clothes and had beaten my head against the walls of the house; and I believed them. But when they said that the grief of this loss would pass, and my heart would become clean like the vast fields of the Ukraine after the grain and the rest of the harvest had been stored, I was silent.

Standing upon the deck with the others, I felt thankful that the ship was so high and father could not see that one was missing. I felt, at that moment, that mother had done well in not writing to him about the death of his younger son. It was not out of charity to the feelings of my father that I thought these thoughts and felt as I did. I did not like my father; he meant less than a stranger to me.

But I envied him his suffering, if he should learn, and I was fiercely jealous of his pain. Rightly perhaps, I felt I was more entitled to grieve for my brother than he.

That night we slept aboard the ship, symbol of all the suffering we endured in crossing. We could still feel the vomit and ammonia smell of the sea in our nostrils, and see the emptiness of water unrelieved by anything but cheerless birds of the sea, and

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masses of weeds. But from the new way some of the sleepers snored it could be seen that assurance had partly, if not altogether, returned to them; others, however, tossed and moaned upon their bunks.

I dreamt that my dead brother was standing over my bunk. His face was sadly-wise, and he stroked my shoulder with his bony fingers. I tried to move but could not, watching him with horror and fascination. I awoke clutching desperately at the dream, and gazed hopelessly upon the floor, which was strewn with filth.

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After breakfast we were all herded together like sheep. Pale, frightened ghosts that we were, hovering between two worlds: one which had castigated us with rods of steel and had afterwards cast us out, the other, rigid, indifferent, before which we had to cringe and weep, and which would admit us only after it had drained our hearts of all hope.

Our will or our pain did not matter, for we were all very tired; and, like most very tired people, we knew that when we reached the point of exhaustion we would fall asleep while standing up or being led about; and we would do, while sleeping, what we had done while awake.

A gangplank was lowered to the terminus of a ferryboat, which took us to Ellis Island.

Ellis Island was as grey and heartbreaking as a third-class cabin; all the buildings were of grey stone, bitten with greenish mould and overgrown with lichens and moss. Some windows were barred with twisted pigiron, others framed heavy nontransparent glass interwoven with fine wire. Through the bars we watched the seaweed float leisurely up the bay.

The doctors who examined us were as cruel as the power which had set them to this task; they pawed over us gingerly, obscenely, with the conviction in their eyes that we were no longer capable of either shame or pain.

Then, with our bundles in our hands, we were questioned in turn by many clerks sitting on very high stools. These clerks all wore black alpaca coats with shiny buttons, and tall starched collars. The desks on which they wrote were also tall and inclined at a curious angle, like the wooden stands on which Jews rest their prayer books in the

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synagogue; all of them even smiled the same sour way into their sheets as they in turn wrote mother's answers to their questions.

On the other side of the partition was father; he, too, was being questioned, and the answers of both were compared.

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Suddenly something stopped; the machinery of procedure jumped out of gear and could not go on. Mother grew panicky; she looked as if she had lied. The clerk stuttered in his anger, because the unusualness of the situation threw him back on his rusty brain; he perspired heavily. He tried to be helpful in an official way, his confusion arousing his sympathy and bringing his humanity to the surface. But it was clear that he did not know how. There was the brutal statement:

“Your husband says he has four children, madam, and you have only three. How do you explain that, madam? What are we to think of it, madam?”

Mother stammered; her lips grew white. Tears streamed from her eyes, and she began to explain things to the clerk in a halting manner.

The clerk looked frightened. He bent his head lower, as her increased sobbing made mother's explanation harder to grasp; his stool swayed dangerously, and he held on to his desk with his thin nervous fingers. A pained smile appeared upon his face; and whether he suddenly understood or did not care to listen any longer to this story which affected him in a painful manner, he said we could go. We all ran after mother like newly hatched chicks.

And father, on the other side of the partition, what did *he* think of at that moment? How did *he* feel?

As soon as he saw us he cried out: “Bessie—my children!”

His face was lined with weariness and his eyes were red. There were two distinct grooves running down his cheeks from his eyes where his tears had fallen. He looked very helpless and broken.

He embraced each of us passionately and protectively. At that moment I had a feeling of love, drawn forth by compassion, for my father. But when he drew me to him, my

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head and legs bent back like a runner's, and my muscles grew taut as a string. He must have felt my resistance, because he did not try to force his affection upon me.

He was happy then and did not question mother about the dead boy; this raised him greatly in my esteem. And he was the same as he had always been, because when he was happy he was ridiculous, like an old man in love. He took some woolen caps from his pockets and fitted them on the heads of my two sisters and myself; the caps were warm and had red tassels at the top, like the Turkish fez, but because we felt that they were comical we were very uncomfortable in them. And again a moment of tragedy, the sometimes ridiculous but inevitable tragedy which enveloped the life of this man, my father:

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He had brought four caps along with him, but had not found the time in which to hide the spare cap somewhere; when mother saw it, she grew hysterical, and father gazed at her helplessly and with twitching lips. He wanted to utter her name, but his thin cruel lips would not obey and the words vibrated in his throat, making a curious sound.

We took the ferry to Bowling Green, then the Elevated, and all the way to our new home people gazed at us as if we had descended from another planet; we wanted to remove our caps, but father pleaded with us in such a way that it was not possible to disobey him.

When we descended the stairs of the Elevated, father walked briskly ahead of us, as was his habit, and the cap intended for the dead boy stuck out of one of his pockets. We ran after him, as if fearful of being abandoned. The snow crunched beneath our feet, and the jagged cinders on the sidewalk punctured the thin soles of our shoes. All the time I kept my eyes on the cap which stuck out of father's pocket, thinking of my dead brother.

A postman, his mailbag hanging from his shoulder, passed us on a bicycle as we came to Brook Avenue, the tires of his machine squealing as they collided with the hard snow.

We entered our new home slowly and with shyness, as if into the house of a stranger. The flat was dark and airless, and for the first few minutes we huddled against the walls in fright. The furniture was old and hastily arranged, and a lot of rubbish was piled on the kitchen floor.

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As soon as we passed the threshold, father began to sob helplessly.

Then he put the spare woolen cap on the table, and lit the little gas stove; it hissed suddenly, and slowly the frost began to dissolve on the window panes. We devoured the food he put before us with bulging, greedy, envious eyes, thinking that perhaps this was only a dream and the next meal was far away.

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Afterwards he gave us all new clothes. He folded the suit he had prepared for the dead boy and put it away carefully into a drawer, as if he expected him to appear at the door one day and claim it.

Evening came, and a great stillness descended over our lives. We had been tired a long time, and now our tiredness was beginning to thaw; and as we swayed drunkenly in our seats, shadows of madness and grief began to invade the house.

We sat up and listened; our nerves were tense, and the eyelids fluttered like wounded birds over our eyes.

The unclaimed white woolen cap with the red tassel lay on the table and, for some reason, the eyes of all were turned towards it; in the darkness of the room it stood out like a single star on a foggy night. The rust in our blood was heavy and poisonous, sharpening our grief; and at that moment we became aware of the return of the dead boy into our shattered lives.

He, too, had come to America.