

Fear Itself, The Rapture, and The Sweet By-And-By

By Michael Fine

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When the news of the Omicron variant spread around the globe, Shulamit Jablowski told her lover Ahmed to stay in France. Ahmed was from Cote d'Ivoire. Shulamit lived in Providence, Rhode Island, in a second story walk-up on Broadway near Parade Street, and was in a new relationship with a woman she'd met on Facebook, a woman she wasn't sure was even real. But she didn't want to break Ahmed's heart again. I shouldn't have slept with him, Shulamit told herself. I was indulging his fantasies about a big relationship and not centered on what moves me. It was his voice I was hearing, not my own. I'm not so sure I want a relationship at all, she thought. A good orgasm once in a while is okay. Even necessary. But people are complicated and get needy. I have my own needs and my own desires, Shulamit thought. I just want my space. My freedom to be who I am.

But what was she going to do with the kid? River was seven and in public school. It was a little claustrophobic in their one-bedroom apartment stuffed with house plants during the first lock-down, but they made it work. You invent, experiment, and improvise. Think on your feet. Life became exhilarating. Quiet but filled with new kinds of meaning. New ideas. New emotions. New textures.

That distant learning that wasn't much of anything, for kids, so Shulamit took to reading to River at night for two or three hours at a time, reading anything Shulamit herself was interested in: Shakespeare's juicier plays, Foucault, Habermas, the Old Testament (in English but with lines and phrases in Hebrew when Shulamit herself couldn't make sense of what was going on or when River had a question), Clarice Lispector (in translation, not in Portuguese), that George Saunders novel about Lincoln until River just couldn't follow it, and *The Secret Life of Trees*.

Still, the lockdowns were easier on a kid like River than their chaotic life before the lockdowns. No more being parked different places when Shulamit had to go out. No endless choices between alternatives that didn't matter, hair colors and genders and so forth. No more teasing about having skinny arms or a fish face. River stayed home, read books that were too old for her, went for walks with Shulamit to different parts of the city or tagged along when Shulamit went to their garden plot in the spring and summer. Then River rode her bike around and around the community garden, waving to the people who hoed or weeded.

But then they opened the schools again and life for River went back to crazy -- in-person learning but everyone had to wear a mask and sit first six feet and then three feet apart and no one could eat in the lunchroom. And everyone was supposed to get tested once a week. Though no one checked so most kids didn't get tested, and for a while no one was sick and then everyone was sick but only with a runny nose or a cold so who really cared. Except everyone cared. And was completely phobic about sneezing or coughing or hugging or touching. And then they'd have virtual learning a day or two a week sometimes without warning, so no one could plan anything and Shulamit couldn't organize her life. Or sometimes her class or the school would shut down for a week or two. For this disease that really wasn't making anyone sick. Except when it did.

Then Shulamit started going out again. Which meant parking River different places from time to time.

That was life without lockdown. Which wasn't life either.

Will they close the schools again with this Omicron? Shulamit asked herself. Will Omicron do for them what Shulamit couldn't do for them herself? Which is to have a life that is simple and sweet, but also alive and meaningful.

It is a cool, rainy December. The earth is washed of color. People hurry when they go from place to place, afraid that their eyes might meet those of someone they know and that then they would have to calculate the risks of a fist-bump, handshake, or embrace, understanding that there is no right answer. Spring and summer were impossible to imagine. This drabness is their life.

One rainy Thursday at about six in the evening when it is already dark someone pounds on their door. The doorbell rings, shrill and electric. Then that someone pounds on their door again, and Shulamit walks down the creaky narrow stairway to see who is there.

"Hey," Yudi says, their eyes cool and blazing, but they are looking worse for wear, their face drawn and grey in the fluorescent porch light, their beard and moustache shaved and scraggly now where it had been full, hennaed, chestnut brown, and down to their chest the last time they'd blown through town. Their hair is thinning now but hand cut-shaggy and also

hennaed, although some of the henna has washed out so it looks sandy-grey instead of the dirty blond of their youth. The henna on their hands has been mostly washed off. Their face is bruised.

“Makarah motek (what’s up, babe),” Shulamit says back.

Then River comes bounding down the stairs, taking three steps at a time, mostly flying, and Yudi grabs River and twirls her end over end like she is a baton. They put her on their head and rubs her belly with the top of their noggin like they used to do when she was two and three, and she squeals with delight again like she does only when Yudi shows. Shulamit herself can’t stop grinning and something pulls at her from the inside, and she remembers what she saw in him and them in the first place.

“You’re ok?” Shulamit says. There is a healing bruise and a scrape on one side of their face and a big healing abrasion on one shoulder, on the same side, and the cloth on one leg of their black tights all torn up on the same side. New black stick-and-poke tat on Yudi’s neck.

“B’seder (It’s all good),” Yudi says. They speak in English to one another now, mostly. They think in English now. It is a business language, cut and dried, not brusque and poetic the way Hebrew is, with none of the blunt sex or wind of the roots blowing through the speech of their youth. They are who they have become. Still scarred inside and scared to death. But tough as nails outside, to anyone else, an exoskeleton like an insect, a coat of armor for the world to see. Don’t you step on me.

“You’re not okay,” Shulamit says, raising her eyebrows a little. If she wore glasses, she’d be looking over her glasses at them. They see her looking at the bruises.

“Christ hasn’t come back yet,” Yudi says.

“You noticed? Yeshua ben Josef the rock star? He wasn’t so good for the Jews. Wasn’t once enough? If we do the same thing over and over, you think we’ll get a different result?” Shulamit says.

“The end of days is coming. He is coming back and then the faithful will be lifted...”

“Into the clouds,” continues Shulamit, interrupting, her voice clipped and tired. “And the dead will rise and meet the Lord in the air and then the Kingdom of God will reign over the earth. I know the drill. So what else is new? If human beings gave the same thought and energy to one another that they give to Jesus, Buddha, the Hindu gods and goddesses and Mohammed, maybe. But not in my lifetime and not in yours. We are all the same people we were. Humans chase gods and one another. The more things change the more they stay the same. You had a bad fall?”

“It wasn’t a fall. It’s all good,” Yudi says. “You have coffee?”

But when Yudi puts River back down on the floor to stand on her own two feet and drops their pack on the kitchen floor, Shulamit begins to think they might be in for trouble.

The pack itself is orange but dirty from life on the road, so gray-brown orange. Yudi has a tent lashed to the pack-frame that Shulamit that’s ripped. It is blue and gray but it is also dirty so gray-brown blue and gray, with the gray-brown orange of the pack and the grey-brown blue-green of the tent somehow color-coordinated, and there is a light green sleeping pad rolled up and lashed to the pack frame as well, its patina the same grey-brown, so it looks like part of a set; and a very high tech skateboard painted dayglow colors with all sorts of decals also lashed onto the pack-frame. The uniform of anarcho-syndicalism. We are the revolution we make but we need our tools. Shulamit was betting that there is an iPhone what ?10 ??11 even 13, secreted away in Yudi’s cool retro belt-pack, although Yudi probably picked the phone up used so it is probably hot, stolen in NYC or LA and whiped clean by the brothers and sisters of the street, who do that kind of work. Those sisters and brothers trick iPhones into working like burner phones so they can’t be traced, and Yudi knew how to stash or trade his phone out every few

weeks so they stay completely off grid. Or mostly completely off grid. As long as they wanted to be.

The pack etcetera on the kitchen floor means that the pack etcetera is not on another kitchen floor someplace in Providence, Pawtucket, Cranston, West Warwick, Central Falls. Yudi isn't covering his bets again, this time. Yet. It looks like maybe they are planning to hang with Shulamit and River for a while, to the extent they ever plan anything at all, and maybe they are going to ride out Omicron with Shulamit and River, regardless, as usual, of what their plans are, by which Shulamit meant Shulamit's plans. To the extent Shulamit ever plans anything herself.

But it was okay. B'seder. Maybe Yudi was feeling a need for something more. They come and go like always. Maybe he comes and goes now like always, again, just a little bit. We'll see about that, Shulamit thought. But in the meanwhile, for a few minutes, maybe it was okay that River had her dad.

"A fall running for a train," Yudi says.

"You're okay?" Shulamit says.

"I'm okay. More later," Yudi says.

"Tell now," River says. "I want to hear too." She's insightful, that kid. Who knew?

"You need a place to crash?" Shulamit says, still the master of the siege.

"Stay Yudi, stay. Please....." River says, whining again but taking Shuli's bait.

"A couch is good. A few days. This Covid thing...."

"You're vaxxed, yes?" Shulamit says.

"Are you crazy?" Yudi says. "The ego is a disaster. The self is a myth. The vaccine companies own the world, and profit from the misfortunes of others. Let nature take its course.

I for one am ready to ascend to heaven, to make the big aliyah (being called to read the Torah; also what Jews call moving to Israel and thus closer to G-d) that matters, to rise into the sky for my free trip to the promised land, all expenses paid. You fell for their propaganda?"

"Yudi, we are vaxxed and we mask. It's the only right thing. People are dying..."

"I can't stay then?" Yudi says.

"Please Shuli. Pleeaaaasssse...." River says. She knows how to think but she also knows how to whine. A kid. This kidness. A powerful force in human nature.

"We don't hang with people who don't mask and vax," Shulamit says.

"Momma!" River says, as her whine begins to twist into a sob.

"We have a rule," Shulamit says.

"Momma!" River shouts, now demanding.

Shulamit waits a moment for the echoes of River's shout to fade, to think.

"But for you we make an exception," Shulamit says at last, and River's whine turns suddenly into a giggle, as she comes over and hugs Shulamit's waist for a moment, and then goes over to Yudi's pack, which she tries to lift but only knocks over. "A couple of days. On the couch."

"The whole story later then." Yudi said.

"Boruch haba (blessed is he who comes)" Shulamit says, and thinks, River is happy now and focused only on Yudi, which is good.

They climb the narrow staircase, River leading the way, Yudi following with the pack slung over one shoulder, and Shulamit bringing up the rear, the old and narrow stairs creaking and the light from the window on the staircase weak and grey but enough to light their path. Ascending. Aliyah of a sort. A little. One step at a time.

They don't talk later. Yudi unrolls his/their bedroll on the couch. B'seder.

Then the Covid numbers go through the roof, and we get that fake shut down, the non-shutdown shutdown. The Governor won't close the schools and there are still super-spreader events, aka basketball games with 30,000 people at the Dunk but every reasonable person knows to mask up, stray home, and get themselves boosted. Only the world isn't filled with reasonable people.

So River makes it to Christmas vacation, barely, because kids and teachers are getting sick left and right while we pretend that nothing is happening so that people will still go to shop for presents and eat in bars and restaurants because the business of Rhode Island and of America is business, and we always put what matters most, which is the almighty dollar, first.

Then people start dying like flies again, ten, fifteen, twenty a day, but somehow no one notices and the politicians just keep doing their thing because the smart money really is smart, they know which side of the bread the butter is on, and they know everybody is glued to their screens and phones and other drugs of choice and won't remember any of this past next Monday, to the extent they are going to ever remember anything at all. Shulamit sees and thinks about all this.

Putin gets ready to invade the Ukraine. He's got us figured coming and going, Shulamit thinks. I'm betting he's playing the futures market and is making a bundle every time he moves a tank or an airplane from here to there. The CIA and NSA flip out each time which makes the Dow drop 500 points one day, only to recover the next. Talk about insider trading! He's making the US and all of Europe flip out and he's laughing all the way to the bank. Only I'm hoping that those so-called smart guys in the Pentagon and Mossad have fired up the Jewish space lasers and have them focused on the mud in the Ukraine and are keeping it muddy, not frozen, so Putin can't invade, or, taking a page from Parasha Beshelach when Moshe leads the people through the Sea of Reeds at low tide and the stupid generals of Pharaoh's army who think they are invincible come after those Hebrews in their chariots so they all drown, horses, chariots, generals, lieutenants and cavalry, the whole kit and caboodle, when the tide comes back, maybe Putin's generals will get caught in Ukraine and will get swept away by the tide. The more things change the more they stay the same. Go Jewish space lasers! Go Zelensky! And take that, Vladimir!

We got us a Jewish President in the Ukraine and yes we do control the banks and the media. We can see you and you lap-dog the orange haired Fuhrer of the Fourth Reich coming a hundred light years out. Don't you mess with us! Is it good for the Jews? We are a stiff-necked people uber alles, but you just can't beat a Yiddisha kupp when we get a groove on.

But before Shulamit had the chance to ingest all that, to sort it out for herself, to make her peace with it or not and move on, the doorbell rings again, a shrill electronic ring, the sound of the bells over the door Scialo Brothers Bakery on Atwells Avenue only frozen, recorded and amplified so it can wake you whatever the depth of your sleep and send a chill right into your soul even if it were the middle of the summer and 90 degrees.

"I'll get it," Yudi says.

Yudi is gone a long time. So Shulamit goes downstairs.

There is a skin-head person standing on the sidewalk with Yudi and a chopped-out dayglow green and yellow Harley parked on the street in front of the house, parked at an angle but mostly perpendicular to the curb, its raked front end pointed out, ready to go. The person on the sidewalk is thin like Yudi. They are bald with a shaved head and an unkempt matted beard and lots of piercings – eyebrows, earlobes, lips and nose – and have long black and ballpoint blue tats reaching up the side of their neck, on their arms and across their head. They and Yudi are both smoking cigarettes and gesturing with their hands when Shulamit comes out.

It is cold there, and a gray drizzle is falling as night approaches, so the wet street glimmers. The cars have their headlights lit. That light is reflected in the glistening pavement, which has become a black mirror, in which you can also see the red taillights of cars that pass, the traffic lights as they turn red, yellow and green, and the neon signs from the stores along the street: Barber. Pizza. Cell Phone. Theatre. Real.Estate. Spa.

"I'll go," Yudi says, as Shulamit came out of the house.

"Tricky, man," the other person is saying. "Lots of drama."

"Ed," Yudi says, gesturing with his head. "Ed, Shuli, my kid's ema or baby momma or whatever that I told you about."

“Nice to meet you Ed,” Shulamit says. “You want to come in? It’s cold out here, Yudi. You’ll catch a cold. Then you’ll get pneumonia. Isn’t there enough sickness in the world already?”

“I’m okay. We’re okay. We just need a few minutes,” Yudi says.

Ed squints at Yudi.

“Okay. Maybe it’s cold. You have coffee?” Yudi says.

They come upstairs.

It was complicated. It always is. Yudi had been with a woman for over a year. They rode the rails together. They were trying to get from Portland, Oregon to Miami, so they could spend the winter camping on a beach. But she slipped as they were running for a train. And fell. And hit her head. And died.

Yudi jumped off the train when he saw her fall. He didn’t die though. The woman had come to the U.S. from Armenia as a child. Her mother worked in an industrial laundry. Her father cleaned offices at night. She was a tattoo artist who grew up in Brooklyn and went to the Bronx High School of Science before she left all that behind and connected to this different way of living. Her wake and funeral happened three days after she died. But there was a visitation coming up, where family and friends go together to visit the grave seven days after her burial. Yudi was the last person to see her alive. They want to go.

“I’m going,” Yudi says. “How can I not go?”

“Her family is pretty old school,” Ed says. “You don’t know how they’re going to react.”

“You’ve talked to her parents, these people?” Shulamit says. “And explained?”

“I never met them.” Yudi says.

“They speak English?” Shulamit says.

Yudi shrugged. Shulamit looked at Ed. He also shrugged.

“I don’t know them either,” Ed says. “Yo. I was only with Ansel once or twice. She was a dope human though.”

“Aysel. Her name was Aysel,” Yudi says.

“You don’t want any of her people wiggling out on you as soon as show,” Ed says.

“I never met them,” Yudi says. “They don’t know me from Adam.”

“But you’ll talk to them, right? You’ll see them at the cemetery and spill the beans. About how she died. About how you were with her. Their only daughter. Maybe they blame you, man. Then they wig out.”

“Aysel died, man,” Yudi says. “Those people lost their only daughter, who they must think they lost ten years ago. They need people’s love.”

“And you? What do you need?” Shulamit says.

“What I need doesn’t matter,” Yudi says. “What they need matters.”

“So you’ll go,” Shulamit says. “And you will walk up to these people and tell them how sorry you are, what a beautiful being their daughter was, and how your heart is breaking too.”

“That’s crazy, man,” Ed says. “And right. But hard.”

“I’m going,” Yudi says. “Simple as that. The truth is the truth.”

“You will take Yudi, Ed. And be there,” Shulamit says. “And we will be here when Yudi comes home.”

They go off on Ed’s bike.

It is late, like ten o’clock, when Yudi comes home. They have a key now so they let themselves in. Shulamit hears the door slam close, the lock click, and then hears Yudi on the staircase, those old wooden steps creaking with their weight, hears the rattle of the metal banister as Yudi puts their hand on it and uses it to haul themselves up the stairs, hears their windbreaker

scrape against the wall as they comes slowly up the stairs, as if he is a heavy old man who drank too much and doesn't have the strength to climb stairs anymore, instead of a wild young man of the road who files their teeth instead of going to the dentist, and who dreams strange dreams, sees visions, and thinks their actions, beliefs, visions and dreams can bring the second coming of Christ and make the millennium happen, the time and place where the lion lies down with the lamb, hunger and fear vanish, justice reigns, and angels sing in perfect harmony twenty-four seven. The kingdom of G-d on earth, and so forth.

“It was okay?” Shulamit says, as Yudi stamps the snow off their shoes and then takes them off.

“It was sad,” Yudi says. “She was young and beautiful. Full of life. An amazing imagination. Many dreams.”

“And her parents?” Shulamit says.

“They were okay. Sad too. Very sad. It is hard to lose a child. Impossible.”

“They were okay to you?” Shulamit says.

“They hugged me. We all cried. Even Ed cried,” Yudi says.

“You want to be left alone?” Shulamit says.

“It's okay. You know people in this country have been riding the rails for a hundred and fifty years?” Yudi says, as they take off their windbreaker and fleece and hang them on the pegs near the door, under the waxy green leaves of a golden pothos plant that Shulamit has trained to grow over the door, its stems and leaves snaking around the room where the walls and ceiling meet. “They started after the American Civil War, when soldiers had to find a way to get home.”

“Hobos and tramps. Maybe half a million at once in the 1930s, mostly men looking for work. Men and women who didn't want to be tied down, who wanted to be free and clear more than they wanted three meals a day and a warm bed at night. Freedom. Not three hots and a cot.”

“So?” Shulamit says.

“They had an expression” Yudi says. “ ‘The sweet by-and-by.’ A song, I think. They didn’t say goodbye to each other, like English people do. They said only, ‘see you in the sweet by-and-by.’ ”

“Shalom, yes? Perhaps lehitraot (see you again) ?” Shulamit says. “So what?”

“So nothing,” Yudi says. “I have been thinking about it, that’s all. The sweet by-and-by. Where we all see each other again. Where we are all together again. Where heartache and anger doesn’t happen, and people aren’t afraid and don’t fight.”

“The Rapture, maybe? None of this is real, you know. The world is more complicated than all that,” Shulamit says.

“Not the Rapture,” Yudi says. “Different. Here and now. Real. I’m seeing Aysel right now in the sweet by-and-by. I see you there. I see River there.”

“Hi Yudi,” River says. She is standing in the doorway of her room, next to a dusty rubber tree, in a shadow, in a yellow and blue onesie, rubbing her eyes. Her voice is thick from just waking up. She was standing in the shadows, listening, but talks when she hears her name.

“It’s the river of life herself!” Yudi says.

They go over to River, lift her very slowly off the ground so she has time to laugh from anticipation itself, and puts her belly on his head.

She giggles. And then she laughs from her belly with abandon, as if Yudi has always been with her, and perhaps, always will.