

What You Will

Judah Leblang/2021

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You will start 2020 with a sense of hope, a cautious optimism that this new *'even'* year will be better than the two before, years of personal loss and grief, the death of a brother.

You will *not* fully believe it, as you are a *'glass half empty'* sort of man—the blood of your anxious East-European Jewish forbears pulsing in your veins – bags packed, ready to run.

Still, you will *try your best* as the wheel turns into a new decade during the dark New England winter. For your birthday at the end of February you will go to Kripalu, a retreat center in the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts where you lived in the early '90s. There, back for the first time in many years, a late-middle-aged man of 63 rather than a young man of 36, you sit in a writing workshop with 150 others—only one of whom wears a mask.

You will return to Boston inspired, ready to teach your writing classes, where ten of you meet in a small white-walled room, packed close around a table while news of the “China virus” (as Trump calls it) seeps out like a toxic cloud.

You will ride the T, packed into an Orange Line train that reeks of sweat, piss and fetid breath for the last time on March 13—and then it all shuts down: restaurants, cafes, libraries, public schools. Preparing for the onslaught, the unknown, you will brave CVS, Whole Foods, Stop and Shop – stock your cupboards and clean your fridge – a rare event.

You'll wipe down counters, doorknobs, handles. You *do not/cannot* sew, but fashion your first mask from a torn T-shirt, obscuring face and neck and turning you into a mummy or an extra from *The English Patient*. Your second comes from a purple yarmulke left over from a friend's wedding, fastened with staples and rubber bands.

Hours, days and weeks will pass as time becomes vague and slippery. One month becomes one year, the year lasts a decade and your *to do* lists grow short and erratic, soon to be abandoned. You will lose the urge to clean, organize and design, will feel your motivation dry up like a summer shower. Drawers and closets become *'catch-alls,'* Marie Kondo's worst nightmare.

In July you will brave the 10-hour drive to Cleveland, Ohio, where you'll visit your 90-year-old mother *at but not in* her assisted living facility where she has been locked down for the past four months. You will not fly, will not let her eat in a restaurant but take her for masked rides about town instead, this mother who is too frail, too weak to touch.

You will drive back to Boston as summer turns to fall, as the light fades. You'll ring the juice out of sweet October and cool November—biking along leaf-strewn paths, taking in the colors—auburn, rust, burnt sienna— of falling leaves and the smell of wood in newly-used fireplaces.

By mid-December, you will spend minutes, hours, and sometimes days folded into your blue-and-white-striped couch lulled into stupor by Netflix, Hulu and Amazon — binge-watching one show and another, transported by *The Crown*, *One Mississippi*, and even *Seinfeld* — a show about nothing, infinitely preferable to the shitshow of 2020.

You will hope, pray, believe that 2021 will be better, until the insurrection of January 6, the MAGA-maniacs storming the Capitol, legislators cowering in their chambers as the mob runs wild. Still, there will be room for hope as you watch Trump and his trophy wife leave, as the White House is fumigated and a “peaceful” transition of power occurs — behind razor wire and enforced by 20,000 troops.

Still, you will have hope. A decent man — a *mensch* — as President and two new Democratic Senators from Georgia, a black man and a Jew. The turning of the page, a new year, a new administration, and two new vaccines. You will see more light as the days grow longer and hope that by summer, memories of the pandemic, like those of Trump and his soiled presidency, will fade like a bad dream in the light of morning.

Judah Leblang is a teacher, writer and storyteller in Boston. His new memoir, “Echoes of Jerry: One Man’s Search for His Deaf Uncle and His Own Voice,” is available at judahleblang.com and on Amazon.