

# On Pandemics (and other expected disasters)

L. Rubin

**T**HE SUMMER I put myself in exile was the one after I lost all the weight.

I am walking along the river at the edge of the forest in town. I am not a nature person, rivers don't call to me. I am thirty-one years old, with the first real job of my life and the first lease on my own apartment. My surname was assigned at Ellis Island, when my grandparents immigrated after the Holocaust and the agent chose a name for them that wasn't theirs. That Ellis Island story is a lie. A lie I was told, I think. A friend of mine who's into history texted me a few months into the pandemic: How did your name get changed, exactly? I thought about the question, asked some relatives. That old apocrypha fell apart.

Once, years before, I'd left a planned trip to Berlin early and taken an overnight train to the Czech Republic. I wound up at a bar in Prague that was wallpapered in old maps. After a few beers' worth of staring, I got up and leaned into the wall. I was searching for a set of syllables that had been my grandmother's word for her hometown in Czechoslovakia.

I couldn't find it. No one at the hostel check-in desk had ever heard of it. My grandmother's accent was a mix of Yiddish-Czech-Romanian-Hungarian-French-German-Italian,

so likely I had misheard. Though she was absolutely sure. There was a river behind the trees, she said.

I'd been walking along the abandoned river in the New England town where I'd leased an apartment when the word came to me: *exile*. I felt it should have come to me before.

I'd chosen the place myself. Partly, it was exile from the boy I loved, the one who'd been engaged when I met him and didn't tell me, to whom I didn't tell my grandmother's story. I left him little breadcrumbs to ask about, but he never did. Stubborn. Selfish. I hated this about him and saw myself in both. But there's only room for one of us to be stubborn and selfish!, I wanted to say. All right then, I could hear us both answering. Let it be me.

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Earlier in the pandemic, I'd gone home to my parents. But they wouldn't wear masks in the house, and I had been alone and so careful, Cloroxing packages and getting groceries delivered. My mom started coughing, and I left. I should have felt guilty for abandoning her and I didn't. I was driving north over the Hudson and looking at my own hands easy on the wheel and I thought, oh. This is what my grandmother did. It wasn't heroic, after all. It's the easiest thing on earth, to leave someone behind.

I didn't feel guilty then. I still don't now, and I would say I never will, but I used to cry of loneliness when my roommates left for the night and now I wouldn't live with roommates if you paid me.

I have learned that never only applies to the past, never the future.

Never again is the lesson of the Holocaust. So we are told. In my Reform synagogue growing up, I was taught—or I intuited—that this meant never again would Jews or anyone allow the world to stand idly by a genocide. Jews—I—had a special responsibility to other oppressed peoples. An acquaintance of mine whom I follow on Facebook, too rabidly pro-Bibi to be in my friend group so I keep tabs on him on the side, has a different take. He says it means never again would Jews allow themselves to be led like lambs to the slaughter.

I like this, in the abstract. I like this a lot, it appeals to me, the idea that you can be a lamb led once to your destruction and after that you vow to strap yourself into a machine gun and shoot like a man if anyone dare try a second time.

I have no opinion on whether I like this on a national scale. I like it on a personal scale.

Selfish and stubborn. Him as me.

My mother was fine, by the way. Allergies. She took a Zyrtec.

I am often asked whether Jews are white. I often answer that Jews confound American definitions of race. We are white to a policeman on the street, and also the target of white nationalists. To the farthest right, we're all George Soros; to some of the left, we're perceived as grabbing at opportunities designed for marginalized identity groups. On both sides, American Jews are often held responsible for the politics of Israel. But this is the history of Judaism. The outsider within is the central antisemitic trope. Loyalties always elsewhere. Trump [said so](#) once, of course; too crass to stopper himself, he's a good barometer of which stereotypes lurk just barely under the surface. If he's said it, it's in the collective unconscious.

I get to be white most of the time. I will not experience race-based violence at the hands of the carceral system when I am buying cigarettes or coming home with a sandwich. Police don't scare me any more than average white men with guns scare me, which is a lot.

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The times I have felt the least white are the times I spend with him. The pandemic hit and he told me it wouldn't come to his doorstep. If Trump orders something crazy with the military or militia, they will not come to his doorstep.

He actually said these words.

He is real white, I learn then. He thinks the world's injustices won't come for him. If he cares about them it is as charity or empathy. Whereas if you are harmed by them, or fear harm by them, then to care is mere self-interest.

Selfish and stubborn.

My grandmother used to say—I think—that she was not the moral good just because she was a victim. But the oppressors were the moral bad.

I am not sure if she said this. She is dead now and I've told her stories so many times. Most have become apocryphal. Or they've become the versions I believe they should be, and I don't seek the versions that might contradict. When I've dated non-Jewish boys, I've liked to tell them my version of Judaism as if it's the only one. My take on *tikkun olam*, souls that were next to each other when soul-stuff was formed, holding hands. I don't like dating Jewish boys, who can correct or challenge me. I don't wish to be corrected or challenged, not on the most important things.

So I let the apocrypha stand. I am a fiction writer at heart. When I write fiction, I'm told, all my characters are unlikeable. They're okay for the span of a short story and unbearable for the span of a novel. The characters based on me, that is. The ones based on my exes come off pretty well. People like them.

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When the quarantine started, I was its star. I locked my front door and didn't peek out. The grandchild of the Holocaust had always been half-waiting to hole up behind a false wall.

I was ready. I bought soup and bread and pasta like I was stocking up for six months, not the six weeks then predicted. I rejected every social invitation without a thought. I was the person who'd recently published a story about my grandmother's never-made family. Her conviction—did she ever say this? maybe I only sensed it—that we were meant to have this big vibrant family, but they never got to exist. The people meant to bring my cousins into the world were killed before they could. So the never-made souls hang out, ghosts that hover behind our backs, longing to have been made.

Fiction is the realm of the unsolvable problem, my teacher told me in grad school. The realm of the longing-to-have-been.

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I was readier for isolation than I would have been the year before. I was salaried rather than hourly for the first time since grad school. I could teach on Zoom. I noticed the wobbliness of my position, even so. And I wasn't alone. Even Harvard, with an endowment greater than the GDP of [90 countries](#), perceived itself as unable to survive a normal operating year. It froze its

hiring and laid off workers in the dining hall, pleading poor like people do. The perception of loss is too great, no matter how many times above your needs you sit.

Oh yeah, says my friend, classic Harvard, the poverty of the rich institution is the greatest lie they'll ever sell you. He lives in Hong Kong, where everyone wears masks and takes temperatures at doors and keeps each other safe enough to eat inside at restaurants. He is still going on first dates. He jokes that showing your mouth now is like a Victorian showing her ankles.

My friend is intimately familiar with David Swensen's work with the Yale Investments Office. He says the biggest institutions actually do *better* after recessions than they otherwise would. Of course the small and mid-sized places really might go under. But the richest ones think in fifty-year increments, not six months like you and me.

I believe it, I say. How're the protests?

My friend laughs. The protests are over. China won.

How does it feel?

He thinks about it. In the background of the Zoom call, I see his free weights. He says, Sadder. Scarier. But mostly the same.

I made up the last part of that conversation. The part where I asked how it feels. I am a fiction writer by nature. Internal truths often resist external dialogue. Sigrid Nunez writes some of her dialogue as, "I said without speaking." This seems more nonfictional than fictional, to me.

But this is essay, I understand. Here's a nonfictional thing, to make up for the lapse: six months after that conversation, Harvard posted its fiscal year returns. Its endowment had risen 7.3%.

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When the tides of history move, we move with them. This is the great disappointment, to me, of the past four years. Another of my friends is training to be a historian. He and I were on the phone every night after Trump won, planning our ways out. We are both Jewish. Both grandchildren of the Holocaust, me familially, him communally. It was easy for us to skip denial, skip hope, cut straight to sickening realism. He studies queer French history. My father was born to parents fresh out of a DP camp in Paris. Well, we say, at least we'll wind up there together, *mon ami*.

One day I lament to him that history does nothing. I am referring to the anti-maskers of the Spanish flu pandemic in 1917, maybe; or maybe I am referring to the line I have read in [an](#)



[article](#) about Germany in 1932, “The fundamental assumption of these conservative elites was, of course, that they would control Hitler and use him to realize their agenda, not vice versa.”

My friend says that history doesn’t need to do anything. It offers a lens on the past. That’s enough.

I’m appalled. But it *ought* to do something, I keep saying. Even if it doesn’t, it *should*!

My friend waits in silence for me to wear myself out. You’re right, you’re right, I say eventually. What does ‘should’ do? Pop psychology tells us to get out of the way of should.

Stand in the river of your feelings and let them wash over you without judgment. This is an idea lifted from Buddhism. I had a teacher once who said that, done correctly, meditation is not calming but is in fact a profound disturbance. You are doing it wrong if it doesn’t uproot your world. This is why, he conjectures, the data shows that people use the meditation apps for a few weeks and then stop. A few weeks, he says, is around when you might start getting good at meditation. You might feel the slight shift of your world starting to change.

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People don’t like change. They do the exercises—meditation apps, river visualizations—that allow everything to stay exactly as it is and also be okay.

I dislike his therapist, for this reason. 'His' being my boyfriend's. Fifteen years of singlehood spent longing for that word, and turns out I'm uncomfortable using it. I call him my boyfriend figure, sometimes. Partner is easiest to speak aloud, though perhaps not yet true.

He goes to his therapist to help him learn how to stop pleasing people. This is hilarious to me, sometimes when I'm thinking about it in the shower I laugh out loud. I spend so much time helping him learn how to please me.

His therapist wants him to focus on his own needs. Block out how others will perceive you, she says. He tells me she is young and hot and runs Zoom therapy from her bed. She says he needs to follow his own needs. He tells me this as if it's a doctor's prescription, a silver bullet, unassailable, anytime I express that I have needs too. He says he thinks I get off on anger, it becomes a feedback loop.

In truth I also have a therapist. She tells me to focus on my own needs.

Therapy wants to lead you to acceptance. The final stage of grief. Therapy treats life as grief, which I don't disagree with. But I have never accepted grief. I am a rage against the dying of the light kind of girl. I would rather die early, cortisol clogging my arteries, with my fists clenched.

My blood pressure runs high, in New England. It was never high before this year. I am thinner than I've been since high school and I eat vegetables I cook myself and I have isolated well and fully and, here in hiding, the cortisol I court in a feedback loop is doing its work. It isn't anger I'm committed to, I should have told him. It's fear.

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So, exile.

My two great fears: that I would be alone forever. And that fascism would come to America as easily and quickly as it did to Germany after 1932.

And now: the latter is possible. Is approaching. I write Facebook posts about it that get twelve likes each. No one believes me, or is able to live in my dark vision for long enough to read the words.

And: finally, for the first time, I don't have to be alone. I have a man, at last, who loves me. After fifteen years of adult life—my entire adult life—spent alone, I am not alone anymore. (I had roommates, of course. I had family and friends who were like family.)

And yet. When my one-year contract ends in New England and I lose my reason for being there, I choose not to move away. I stay put, living in a one-bedroom I found on Craigslist, and there are more trees than people and no Indian food. There are rivers I don't care about,

hiking trails and forests and campgrounds in the White Mountains that don't move me. The pandemic is a time of profound aloneness, and I choose to be more alone.

I could have pushed to be with him, maybe. But covid set off a lot of conflict for us. It was ironic. Right when he'd finally committed to me, and suddenly we're in a new world in which I perceive far more threat than he does. At one point early on, I said that Italy had closed its highways and thus America could too. We lived 1100 miles apart. How would we get to each other then?

He told me we wouldn't close the highways. I said why not. He said because it just won't happen here.

I said those were the ominous words that begin every memoir of the Holocaust you care to open.

A friend of mine, who'd once been suicidal, told me: once you've been to a place that dark, you're always afraid of it coming back. You know it's possible.

Did living feel like this, in 1932? Did the world feel exactly this way—poised on the brink of a political catastrophe too terrible to allow yourself to fully imagine? Hoping and waiting for a *deus ex machina* in the form of some law or rule or miraculous vote? Nonetheless moving on as normal, buying bread, meeting lovers, crying over your own little life.

When he said it won't happen here, I flew off the handle. It was impossible: this man who loved me, could he not hear my family in those words? Did he not know that my grandmother must have bucked those words, in order to survive?

Most of all, would he not adopt the wisdom of my family, even if it wasn't his? Isn't that what love does? There's a quote I've quadruple-underlined, from Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*: romantic love makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved.

He insists my wisdom is mine alone. That it's emotional, not rational. I tell him this is misogynistic and he says he isn't misogynistic. He doesn't vote like he is, that's true.

I do love him. I should say this here. Nonfiction is dangerous, right about now I'm regretting it. He is the only man in the world who sings to me, every night of the pandemic, he stays on the phone replacing our pet names in song lyrics until I'm sleeping. Even when I have spent the day yelling, at him or at the world, or pacing with heartburn and anxiety and a certitude that the Gestapo is showing up at people's doors, and that mine is next.

They are. ICE is.

Even when I have spent the day pacing, he sings me to sleep. He has a beautiful, musical voice, and infinite patience. I never have a memory of his leaving, come morning.

All this is so much more love than I ever thought I would get, orders of magnitude more,  
it is a blessing. I know I can't be easy.

When he told me it just wouldn't happen here, I told him that my grandmother hates  
him.

For this, I do feel guilty.

He has clung to this. It comes up every so often. I'm glad it does, in truth; if it didn't  
matter to him then there could be nothing between us. He must care about the opinion of my  
grandmother, who is dead. I used to wear the diamond ring she willed me every day. I told her  
story all the time, when I was wearing it. A conversation piece. Like a tattoo. Once I started  
dating him more seriously, my fingers had grown too thin for it. I took it off.

So, exile.

The summer before all this, he went back to the other woman. We had been together the  
week prior, on vacation. In love, in public, I was his partner and we drank margaritas on the sand  
and floated on each other's backs in the ocean.

I was at a writer's residency when I found out. That was how I learned he'd been  
engaged.

I spent four weeks at the residency. When I got back home—which at that time was a four-person house-share—my roommate’s mom was in our living room. It was pre-pandemic; the thought of a sudden extra person in the living room seems absurd to me now. But then she was in the living room, dusting a shelf we never dusted. I’d lived with her son for two years by then, and had met her several times. She didn’t recognize me.

She wasn’t the last. Friend after friend who I passed on the street didn’t even say hello. Oh my god! they would say, when I stopped them and said hey, it’s me. You’ve lost so much weight!

I hadn’t noticed a thing that had changed about my body. But I went into my roommate’s room and stepped on her scale. I could not believe the number at my feet. I hadn’t seen a reading that low since high school. I had lost 25 pounds in five weeks. I’d had no memory, none at all, of not-eating.

So, exile.

He brings it up sometimes. He asks: Do you still think your grandmother hates me? I prefer it when he asks a different way: Does your grandmother still hate me?

It almost makes me cry, when he asks that. It makes me never want to hurt him, when he asks that, which is a certain kind of love. Wanting to hurt him is another.

Love, I ought to say, does not need to be healthy in order to be love. It should be healthy, yes, maybe it should be. We stand in the river and let *should* pass us by.

I don't have an answer for him. Does my grandmother hate him? She is suspicious of him. He realized very quickly that the other woman was a mistake. They split. He came back. For contrast: her husband showed up at her doorstep during the war, bringing nougat in a time of stale bread and dried cheese. Would my partner flee with me? Would he take me seriously? Would he make me wait until it's too late, until everyone agrees fascism is here and thus there's no escaping it?

He is American since the 1700s, on both sides of his family. He believes fascism won't come to this country and, if it does, it won't come to his doorstep. Maybe he is wrong, of course. Maybe his political views—leftist, always has been—will come to kill him. Maybe he is with a Jewish woman. Jews may not be the first or foremost target of this 21<sup>st</sup>-century American form of fascism—which is to say, European strongman-style, mixed like an accent with white nationalism, American exceptionalism, a Hollywood reality-show disregard for actual reality. But white nationalism rises alongside neo-Nazism. Anti-Jewish violence in America is [at its highest](#) in 40 years. The people who lived through the Holocaust aren't here to tell their stories. I don't believe this is a coincidence.



Before the Tree of Life in 2018, I used to go to Berlin and Prague and see the armed guards outside the synagogues and feel lucky that I lived in a country that didn't need them.

And maybe he is right. Maybe they won't come at all. Maybe they won't come for him. Maybe he can renounce his views and slap on the armband. Maybe he can renounce me. Maybe he won't need to.

It is speculation, pure speculation, to wonder what he would do. He has his own life to consider. His own family. But that's his essay, not mine.

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The highways never closed here. I know, because I chose exile.

For a few months, anyway.

Until, at last, the fact of this partnership pulls me out. It's October. I'm going to visit him. We are going to drive twenty hours in a car during a pandemic.

Once again, I am prepared. I buy Travel Johns. I pack trail mix and water bottles and caffeine. I buy sanitizer and gloves and wipes and extra masks. I try and fail to get him to promise not to use gas station restrooms.

In the car, we listen to audiobooks. We listen to Biden on the radio. We hope he'll get through without repeating himself or catching on a word. We listen to evangelical talk radio calling Trump a flawed prophet.

Around DC, I say something that makes his knuckles go white on the steering wheel. I am thinking about citizenships elsewhere. In Europe.

He doesn't say anything. He must be mad or sad that I would think of leaving. But then it occurs to me that he might be jealous. My ancestry means I have a claim—at least a claim, bureaucratic as it may be, at least a hope—of citizenship elsewhere. His Americanness traps him in America. My grandparents, in a strange way, gave me a gift. I loved and knew my grandmother, it's her story and her ring that I carry with me or else put away, but all my claims are through her husband. My grandfather, who died before I was born. Who gave me his genes and maybe his nationality and maybe a pathway to life.

I think he might be jealous, as we drive into Virginia. I think his jealousy makes him dig in deeper. Lay claim to America, to this way of life, to the fact that he is too old and tired to start over. I might drive a cab or clean houses, but he is a white-collar guy and he isn't going backward. I'm a white-collar girl, too. But my family story contains the story of people who gave

up their cultural competency to come to America and be a cab driver. I'm willing to do it again, in reverse. It's *in* me, in ways it isn't in him.

He asks me why. How is it in me, I wasn't alive back then, why is it so alive to me now.

We've just crossed the border into South Carolina. Grain silos and giant blue Trump signs. The election is a month away.

Of my grandmother's many siblings, only one survived the war. That isn't true, actually. Two survived Auschwitz, skeletons together, but then one was overfed by the Americans who liberated him. The soldiers were just eighteen years old. They'd been told not to overfeed the skeletons, but the men were so hungry and they had bread.

I tell him this story. The terrible irony of it, surviving the camps only to die of liberation. Never knowing one sister survived.

He says, But there's a weird blessing in it.

Sometimes he does this, talks in terms of blessing, though he says he has no religion and isn't spiritual. I wonder if he has adopted this terminology only when talking to me. If so, I'm pleased.

He says, At least he knew the nightmare was over. He says that he hopes his father lives to see the end of the Trump era. To know that the nightmare ends. He says that we look back on

history with this bias: we know the horror ends. We know my great-uncle has two years to liberation, from 1943. But from the vantage of the past, the camps could last for ten years. For a hundred. For eternity.

Better to die being fed than being starved. I am surprised this is something he believes. I am glad.

We pull into a gas station. I scoot forward to use the Travel John while he gets out to use the restroom. I don't think there's a Biden sign in all of South Carolina. I am worried that history will look back on this era and see the perfect storm: American fascism rises just as covid shuts the borders of the world. Every exit ramp closed. Canada closed. The US passport largely useless. The apparatus of bureaucracy closed. I look into Canadian permanent residency. The test to prove I am fluent in English isn't currently being given in the United States. Covid risk.

Ironies everywhere. To be locked out of Canada, with points I am scoring from their immigration office thanks to my degrees granted in the English language, for want of the English test.

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Weeks later, in his house, I will be on the floor of his office, reading documents my relatives have uploaded to support my European citizenship application. I will discover, in a reparations

request from the '90s, that my grandmother had had a forced abortion. I never knew this story.

She had told me her story many times, she had cried over the people in the photographs, and never mentioned it.

I will wait a few days to tell him. Finally, while he is searing fresh-picked peppers for dinner, I will tell. He will listen. He will say, Remember that story you published? About the never-made cousins in your grandmother's cosmology?

Of course I remember. It was the first thing I'd thought of when I read the document.

He will say, In fiction, you usually go from the literal to the metaphor. But this time you picked up on the metaphor, and now you discover the literal.

Of course my grandmother sensed there was a never-made baby. It wasn't spiritual, it wasn't some personal cosmology about a never-made ghost who lingered behind our backs. It was literal. It was hers.

In the story I'd written, before I knew this truth, the granddaughter believes she is one of the ghosts.

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Later still, that November, Biden will win the presidency. I won't be convinced that he will get to be inaugurated, but nonetheless I will be moved. I will watch him thank his vice-president, his family, and the nation, as he stumbles, very occasionally, on a word.

I will think of the evangelicals who defend Trump as a flawed prophet. In the Hebrew Bible, among the flawed prophets, most have stories that are esoteric or obscure. But there is one flawed prophet we might know. Moses.

His flaw?

He had a stutter.

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He comes back from the bathroom in South Carolina. I bag the Travel John and rest it at my feet. As he puts the car in drive, I see myself as from the outside: A woman sitting next to him in a car with masks stuffed into the console between them. Eighty percent by volume the person she was when they met. She is driving miles to see him, the first love of her life. The only man, maybe, willing to love a woman who is constantly looking over her shoulder for a ghost that isn't quite there and a Gestapo that doesn't quite exist today. Not quite. Not for her. Not yet, anyway. Maybe soon, maybe not.

But she doesn't live where he is. She has chosen to live in New England, alone. She is holding his hand over their masks in the armrest, laughing with him, pointing him to the next exit, scrolling to his place in his audiobook, zooming into the Google map on her phone, the border with Canada, the mountains you could get lost in, the rivers and the forests, all those trees.

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