

THE COMING

1.

The holy city of Jerusalem cowered beneath the purple haze of dusk. Despite a violent and tragic history, it survived on the divine promise of peace. Extolled by prophets, it had repeatedly suffered the hysterical terror of ignorant men. Inspired by God and ravaged by devils, the crossroads of heaven and hell, Jerusalem was the eternal precipice of life on Earth.

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Rifka went to her kitchen window, looked out over the Old City, and trembled. The House of David swathed in shadows, the golden Dome of the Rock glistened in a faint shroud of moonlight. Rifka was glaring at the Mosque when a streak of lightening struck fear in her heart: *Was it God's wrath? The Sword of Allah?*

She didn't know, didn't care. Whatever the cause, she would suffer the consequence. Her thoughts melded into the deepening dark, into pain. She scratched at the numbers embedded in her forearm, fought back tears and remembered: Misha, her only son, had died on such a night three years ago, in battle, in vain. He was on reserve duty near the Lebanese border when his unit was called into action against Hezbollah guerrillas.

Nothing had really changed. Now David, Misha's only son, Rifka's only grandson, had been called into action. His unit had been activated before dawn, following a rash of hostilities in Northern Israel. Resurgent Hezbollah guerilla activity in Southern Lebanon had already claimed forty-seven Israeli lives during the past ten days. Israeli jets had twice tangled with Syrian fighters over the Golan Heights during the past week. Following the loss of one fighter, Syria threatened to avenge its poor showing in the air and liberate its Palestinian brothers from Zionist oppression for once and all time.

The bravado was all too familiar, but the unrelenting pressure from the West for democratic change in the Middle East bred instability, and the mounting tension was bound to find the weakest link in the chain of historical madness.

The Intifada, which had begun in 1983, resumed for a third time with a vengeance. Radical Jews, settling the West Bank, remained hostile and intractable while Palestinian terrorists continued to kill themselves in an effort to sabotage the peace process. Once again, reprisal begot reprisal and continued to heighten tensions in neighboring countries. As these tensions rose, Islamic fundamentalist activity in Egypt and Jordan began to win popular support and threatened to challenge both moderate governments.

More worry—and the prospect of more pain and more death—were never far from Rifka's mind. She continued scratching at the numbers on her forearm and cursed her fate. A survivor of the holocaust, Rifka tended to define her life in terms of pain and loss. Her future, her only hope, was defined in terms of her grandson, David. She lived for him. She had no life apart from his: no hope, no joy, and no reason to live.

"Bastards," she muttered, stepping back from the window.

She grabbed a dishtowel, wiped the sweat from her forehead and glimpsed her stout reflection in the pane. Framed in darkness and distorted by the kitchen light, it was hardly attractive. Life hadn't been particularly kind to Rifka. She was a short, stocky woman with dark penetrating eyes and an olive drab complexion. Once a teenage beauty, her luxuriant, black hair had turned grey before her thirty-fifth birthday. Nearing eighty, the strong nose had turned into a burly ridge of defiance.

She was deeply saddened, on the verge of tears, when a familiar voice interrupted her thoughts.

"You're thinking about our David?" Leila began, slipping into the kitchen behind Rifka.

Leila was Misha's widow, David's mother. She lived upstairs, directly above Rifka, and had quietly slipped into Rifka's apartment to say good night.

Rifka—strong, fearless, unyielding, the ever-present, ever-loving daughter of Israel—would not betray a weakness. She placed her hands on her stout hips and turned to meet the challenge. "I should be thinking of someone else?"

Leila smiled and went to embrace her.

Rifka shrugged and raised her hand. "I'm wet. You can hug me later."

It was hot in the kitchen. Rifka had been cooking all day: For whom or what? Leila didn't know. Together, these two women comprised the entire dinner party. David was away in the army. Michael, Rifka's only nephew, lived in America. The remainder of the family was dead.

"I won't be here for supper, Mama," Leila finally said, avoiding Rifka's eyes.

Rifka shook her head and turned her attention to the stove. "Where is to go on such a night?"

Leila tugged at an errant curl behind her ear as she spoke. "To see some friends, to be with them: they also have children in the army and . . ."

"And what?" Rifka demanded, turning her attention back to Leila. She didn't like the idea of Leila going about Jerusalem after dark—it was dangerous—and she didn't understand why Leila was dressed up in heels and blue silk dress on the eve of war. "You go to a boyfriend? You have a boyfriend?" she pressed.

Leila stopped tugging at her hair and met Rifka's challenge. "And if I do? Three years is not enough to mourn your son? Misha wouldn't be happy for me, if I was happy? I am only forty-two years old, Mama! I can still have a life even if it isn't okay with you."

It was okay; it wasn't okay. Life must go on; the dead must not be forgotten. Rifka was an archetypal Jewish woman living a ghost of a life in a neither world of her own making. She looked to the floor and was becoming lost in a rush of conflicting thoughts and feelings when Leila continued softly, "I am just so afraid for David. I am so nervous and I say the wrong thing, and I mean nothing for you to worry about. I have no other love. I still cry for Misha every day, and sometimes I need to cry with a friend."

What friends? Rifka wondered—she had never met any of Leila's friends—but she decided not to press the issue and accept the apology. "You just be careful where you go and don't stay out too late. The Arab bums could be anywhere in the streets."

Leila smiled, stepped forward and kissed Rifka on the cheek.

Such a Meshugeneh, Rifka thought. She reached for a large plastic container beside the stove and handed it to Leila. "Soup for the old man in the basement. Bring it down to him before you go."

Alone in the kitchen, Rifka turned up the radio and heard more bad news: confirmed intelligence reports indicated that Syria had consummated a massive arms deal with Russia: a bill providing emergency military aid to Israel was meeting stiff resistance in the U.S. Senate. The American government was doing its best to appear neutral and broker the peace.

Rifka shook her head in disgust and sighed. She had no great faith in America. She had again begun to ponder the cursed fate of the Jew when the phone rang in the kitchen. It was her nephew, Michael, calling from New York.

"I just called to see how you're doing," he began.

"Doing? What is to do? They kill us. We kill them."

Rifka never failed to reduce the dramatic to banal simplicity. She didn't want Michael to worry.

Michael forced a laugh. "You sound like my mother."

"God rest her soul, your mother still worries in heaven. And you?"

"I've been watching the news and it doesn't sound too good. How's David?"

Rifka drew a deep breath and sighed, "He's away in the army. In the Jordan Valley, I think. He makes for a good Jew and a good soldier."

Like his father before him, Michael thought. But he wisely omitted the tragic reference to Misha. "And Leila?"

"She comes. She goes. She worries."

It was the same old story. Michael spent another ten minutes on the phone with his Aunt before hanging up and hoping for a new ending. Misha's death was a tragedy; he doubted whether Rifka and Leila could survive the loss of David.

* * *

It was an early spring morning in New York. The sun was climbing the Manhattan skyline as Michael's sad, brown eyes drifted from the telephone to the window. He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to imagine his cousin David's plight, squatting in some godforsaken ditch in a dark corner of Israel, preparing for an enemy attack, fearing for his life.

It seemed unfair to Michael. David was only eighteen years old; Michael was thirty-four and had never known such fear. Michael had led an easy life by comparison, spending four years

in college, another five years traveling around the world upon graduation. He eventually settled in Northern California, where he worked as a journalist for a small newspaper, covering local news for three years until he earned his own column.

Commenting on everything from haute cuisine to dubious politics, Michael's column garnered a great deal of attention until the paper folded. Given the choice of working for an online publication or writing his first novel, Michael chose the latter. It was a laudable endeavor, but hardly comparable to David's mortal challenge.

As Michael prepared to meet the day, his concern for David's welfare got lost in a petty struggle to rationalize his own life. After all, it had taken him three years to complete the manuscript, and he couldn't stop thinking about all the money he had borrowed along the way, and all the favors he had cajoled.

Michael was already twenty thousand dollars in debt to an assortment of friends and credit cards when he decided to return to New York to look for a job while he hawked his manuscript. But times were hard. After ten weeks in the big city, he had no luck with either venture.

"No luck, no purpose," he sighed, checking himself out in the bathroom mirror.

The day-old stubble, tangled shock of black hair already streaked with gray, and the tired brown eyes—Michael had already begun to resent the aging process, the pressure to succeed, to be somebody, the fear of being nobody. No wife, no kids, no money, Michael began to think he would be better off in Israel helping his family. He showered, but he didn't bother to shave.

Back in the bedroom, he dressed for the day—same old jeans, same black boots, fresh black shirt—and righted his mind. After all, he did have a date to meet Rachel Gartner in The Bronx.

Michael had run into Rachel the day after he had arrived in New York. He was taking a nostalgic tour of the old neighborhood when he bumped into her in a corner candy store. Rachel hardly recognized him; Michael had changed so much from high school—from small to taller than she, and dark and handsome. Rachel was even more beautiful than Michael remembered. Having recently cut her hair back, the stylish change highlighted her cheekbones and flattered her dark, almond eyes. The red lipstick accentuated the gentle curve of her mouth.

The attraction was mutual and intense. Michael was frustrated; Rachel was lonely. Her marriage had soured two years ago. The affair was consummated two weeks later in Rachel's

grandmother's apartment in The Bronx. The old woman was convalescing from a mild stroke in a local nursing home, where Rachel often visited with her. Rachel lived in Scarsdale.

His hands in the pockets of his brown leather jacket, his eyes pinned to the sidewalk, Michael walked fourteen blocks to East 64th Street and took the cross-town bus to Broadway, to a stationary store near Lincoln Center. He was about to cross the wide street when he noted a sudden flurry of activity at the confluence of Broadway and Columbus Avenue: orange cones going down on the street, guard rails going up, cops beginning to redirect traffic to Central Park West.

Michael figured that they were setting up for a parade. There were sirens blaring in the distance, which foretold greater danger, but Michael paid them no mind. He was thinking about Rachel as he crossed the street, looking forward to spending another afternoon in bed with her, when a yellow taxi nearly collided with his thoughts.

"Dopey bastard," the driver cried out, swerving to avoid him.

Michael glared at the driver. He was about to say something nastier, when he realized the light had changed. Knowing he was at fault, Michael began to chastise himself as he passed Lincoln Center, oblivious to the high-speed chase barreling down Broadway—more than a dozen police cars racing a white delivery truck until it exploded in front of Lincoln Center, sending a poisonous, effusive white cloud of smoke into the air.

The shock of the blast knocked Michael off his feet, shattering thousands of windows overlooking Lincoln center, killing hundreds of people on impact. The sky raining shards of glass and steel and brick, Michael waited until the bulk of debris had fallen before jumping to his feet and running south down Broadway with hundreds of other people, many holding handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses, blood dripping down their awfully twisted faces as they hurdled the bodies of the less fortunate.

The scene, reminiscent of 9/11, was no less terrifying: Alarms blaring, sirens wailing, people crying and caroming off each other, stumbling around all the wrecked cars and jagged piles of concrete and steel, no one could imagine the heinous extent of the damage.

Michael helped as many as he could, cleansing their wounds and embracing their emotional trauma, before darting into the subway at Columbus Circle and catching the last train to The Bronx, hoping he had outrun the danger.

2.

Government agents had this particular group of Muslim extremists under surveillance for more than a year. The delivery van had been followed from upstate New York since early morning, and nearly intercepted on the West Side Highway north of Washington Heights; it was allowed to pass because the agents in charge of the case were convinced that this was a trial run down to Wall Street, the intended target. Three of four suspects were otherwise occupied with their menial jobs that morning, and nothing had been loaded into the closely watched vehicle to warrant alarm. The driver and only occupant of the van had been driving casually listening to rock music, his window open, his arm resting on the door as he headed into the city.

When the van veered off the highway on 72nd Street, it was finally determined that the risk was too great and cars from several different agencies joined in pursuit down Broadway. They were about to stop the van when the bomb was exploded en route, in front of Lincoln Center, and filled the air with poison. It was a radiological bomb, meant to contaminate the financial district in Lower Manhattan and plunge the United States into economic ruin.

Though short of its target, the bomb wreaked no less terror and the prospect of cancer in those nearest the blast.

* * *

Michael was lucky to be alive. Still in shock when he stepped off the train in The Bronx, he spent the next half hour wandering through the old neighborhood—weaving in and around clusters of people who had gathered on the street to discuss the terror and listen to the bad news—mildly oblivious to his surroundings.

The old neighborhood, once a bastion of Jewish affluence, had turned into a melting pot of urban pathos: dirty streets and many buildings streaked with rust and soot. The security

shattered by crime; there was a profusion of steel gates, triple locks and menacing guard dogs. The schoolyard fence sagged in a dozen different places.

Michael “Pee wee” Katz had grown up across the street from Bronx Park East, where he played little league baseball. He surveyed the field before sitting on a dugout bench and contemplating his baseball career. A four-foot, eight-inch second baseman with great hands and a quick bat, Michael had won the MVP in his second year.

He was thinking about taking a walk through the Bronx Zoo when a scheduling alarm went off on his cell phone reminded him of his date with Rachel. Without hesitation, he headed to her grandmother’s apartment—having become so disconnected from the terror that it seemed more like a dream than a reality, until Rachel opened the door and rattled his composure.

“Thank God you’re okay,” she exclaimed rushing into his arms.

Michael perfunctorily kissed her cheek and stroked her hair. “I’m fine,” he said, following her into the apartment.

“I was so worried about you—and my children. I’m still worried about them.”

Rachel had a son and a daughter, six and eight years old, which was the only reason why she remained married—for their sake.

Michael backed off and looked at her quizzically. “You mean they’re in Manhattan?”

“No, they’re with my mother-in-law,” she agonized. “She took the kids to the mall in Westchester. I’m sure they’re okay, but I couldn’t reach her. The bitch, you would think she would be calling me. So I started driving over there to make sure, but I ran into so much traffic coming from the city. Then I decided to go home, but I couldn’t do that either because of the traffic, so I decided to meet you as we planned. I’ve been calling you too, trying to tell you what was going on with me and to see if you were okay.”

Michael removed the cell phone from his pocket and saw that her calls were unrecorded. The air space must be jammed, like it was on 9/11. I’m sure they’re okay.”

“But I need to know definitely, that they’re safe,” she said, as tears gathered in her eyes. “It’s terrible isn’t it?”

“Really bad, but it could’ve been a lot worse. It was so loud, so sudden and intense—all these people running and screaming—and the smoke. I was just walking down the street and the whole world blew up around me. I fell and I ran.”

“My God, Michael, you mean you were there?”

Michael was momentarily perplexed—knowing he had witnessed the blast, but afraid to admit it. “I was. I’m sure I was. There were a lot of bodies and all these people running and bleeding, and I ran with them. I tried to help, then I caught the train; and I was walking around the neighborhood, waiting to see you and . . . I know it happened, but I don’t want to know.”

“But you have to know. They say the bomb was radiological, and you were so close to the blast.”

“I don’t feel any different,” Michael said, before he began to weep over all the loves and lives lost to the terror.

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Rachel gathered Michael in her arms before leading him to the couch and telling him that he needed to see a doctor.

Michael shrugged and said, “Maybe. But I just don’t understand why there wasn’t any warning. Like I said, I was just walking along and boom!”

Rachel said, “If there was a warning, it wouldn’t have been as much of terror.”

Michael was about to reply when Rachel’s mother-in-law finally reached her on her cell phone, telling her that her children were safe. “They’re going to stay at the mall for a while until the traffic lets up, and I think you need to stay here tonight—at least. They’re saying that the bomb may have contaminated a lot of the Upper West Side.”

Michael looked around the apartment, at the aged gothic furnishings, and faded gold drapes, and cracked hardwood floor. The place reeked of age and stagnation. He didn’t want to stay there, but it was safe and necessary, so he reluctantly agreed. “Be even nicer if you could stay,” he playfully added, kissing her cheek and her neck.

“I would if I could,” she said, looking into his sad brown eyes. You know how much I want to.”

She kissed him on the lips; he kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, and her neck. Falling backwards, they lay side by side on the sofa, kissing and groping one another with so much passion and urgency that the intensity eventually repelled them.

“I can’t,” Rachel said, gasping breath. “We shouldn’t. It doesn’t feel right.”

Michael could hardly argue the point; he didn't feel anything. In fact, their relationship formed the perfect metaphor for the times—both frustrated and lonely, clutching onto to their lives.

"I should go home now, despite the traffic. I should be home for my children when they come home," Rachel said, buttoning her red blouse as she stood.

While she freshened up in the bathroom, Michael turned on the television and tuned into the terror: several people had been killed in the blast; more than seven hundred had been injured, which was less carnage than Michael expected. The problem was radiological contamination, covering an area from six to twenty square blocks depending upon the report he listened to. Projected deaths from contamination ranged from several thousand people over the next five years to several hundred thousand over the next twenty years.

No doubt that Michael's health and life were in real jeopardy, given his proximity to the bomb, but he still didn't "feel" it. He was still inclined to go back to Manhattan when he discovered that the apartment he was using on York Avenue and 78th Street was a safe distance away from the contaminated area—from West 53rd Street to West 74th Street; from Central Park West to the Hudson River.

"You can't go," Rachel reiterated. "Even if they tell you it's safe, because of all the hysteria in the city."

"Then I won't if it'll make you happy," Michael replied, as she slipped into her black high heels.

She was so beautiful, Michael thought, dressed in a tight black jeans and a tight red blouse; the color matching her glossy lipstick, and her hair was so black and shiny. He was becoming lost in a rush of desire when the news of the terror in New York was interrupted by a report of another smaller terror in Israel: Jewish settlers killing Palestinian civilians in an ever-widening campaign of retribution for a terrorist bombing of a Jericho bus station, killing forty-one Palestinians and one Jew, the man who had apparently planted the bomb.

"Terrible, isn't it?" she declared, leaning over the side of the sofa and stroking his hair. If this keeps up, Larry says that Israel will be at war within a week. I told you his father was a big fund-raiser for Israel, and Larry took over when his father died. Larry's been obsessed with Israel ever since. He's been there a lot and he knows a lot of people who know a lot of things."

Michael glared at the television as news reports revisited the devastation at Lincoln Center. "If this keeps up the whole damned world will be at war in a month."

It's all so frightening," she said, sitting beside him and leaning her head on his shoulder.

Their lips met again, softly this time, in a spell of waning grey light.

3.

It was near dark and raining by the time Rachel left the apartment with a promise to return in the morning, "If we decide to send the kids to school," she said. "And if I know Larry, he's going to be very adamant about not giving into the terror, about not changing the routine of our lives no matter what the risks."

Within minutes of her departure, Michael fell asleep on the living room sofa, in front of the television. He was dreaming of Rachel, showing her all the places he had visited during his travels, when a late-night news special connected to his subconscious and revealed his strange fate: Lebanese guerrillas had attacked another small kibbutz in Northern Israel, killing six people, including two children. A bomb planted in the Arab market in Jerusalem killed four more Palestinians. Jewish terrorists were suspected.

The Israeli government was very concerned, but refused to take responsibility for its citizens. "We are convinced that this is not the doing of Israeli citizens. It is the work of Muslim terrorists who are killing their own people in a murderous attempt to heighten tensions in the region," an Israeli spokesman said.

A Palestinian spokesman said that they would, "strike back with a vengeance the world has never seen." It was the same old threat, but nonetheless discomfoting.

The report ended with an update on nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and turned Michael's dream into a nightmare. He was walking arm in arm with Rachel along the beach in Bali when an ominous, dark cloud appeared on the horizon and blocked out the sun. A sudden fierce wind whipped the sea into a tumultuous rage. A clash of thunder shook the earth. Both frightened and bewildered by the violent change, they turned to one another for comfort and embraced.

"Something's wrong," Michael said, parting from the embrace. The first drop of rain fell on his shoulder and burned like acid.

"Something bad," Rachel added.

Michael grabbed his shoulder and winced.

Rachel was terrified by the hole in his flesh and backed away screaming, "My children!"
They're killing my children!!"

Michael heard their anguished cries, but he couldn't see their faces.

Rachel turned and ran screaming down the beach, pleading for reason and mercy until she disappeared into the dark and foreboding distance. The earth shook. The rain turned to blood. The sea turned into a watershed of tortured young souls, all pleading for Michael's help.

Michael was terrified and ran screaming through the dream into the rubble of a nuclear holocaust. He was climbing a pile of smoldering steel girders in search of Rachel, when he saw an old rabbi weeping over a blond-haired corpse in the ashes.

Thank God it's only a dream, Michael thought, as he ran to the rabbi's side.

"Thank Gott for you," the old rabbi said, wiping tears from his bleary eyes. "This is the passion of man and the pain of man, and I t'ink that without you, this terrible dream will soon be the end of every man who cannot love another man. It will be the end of all love and all life."

Michael was stunned. He was about to question the old rabbi when his cell phone rang and woke him from the dream.