

# AFTER PESACH

By Rena Lee

"ALL YOUR life, the days . . . all your life, the nights. . . ." She went on repeating and reciting from the time she woke up that morning. No, it wasn't actually she who was reciting. It was that verse. From the moment she opened her eyes it stole into her head and would not go away. As the verse kept repeating itself, it became sharper with every repetition, more and more pronounced, until it became crystal clear and cutting like a verdict: "All your life . . . the days . . . the nights. . . . All your life from now on. . . . Alone."

Leah Falkovitch is wrapped in a faded dressing gown, once pretty and pink, like so many other things. "Oh yes, way back when we were young and good-looking." A sardonic smile appears on her face. It is her way to always regard herself from aside, as if laying an ambush for herself. Oh yes, then. She had never been good-looking, not really. But she seemed to be when she looked at herself through Shimon's eyes. Won't you stop this maudlin self-pity! She chides herself. Don't you have enough work today? And who insisted on having a Seder at home this year? You yourself! For the last time, you said, before the house is sold. And you talked Shimon into it.

She shuffles in her tattered slippers into the garage looking for a ladder. Since he left her, she has learned to do many chores that normally he would have done, like changing a bulb in the big chandelier over the dining table, or shoveling the snow from the sidewalk in front of the house, or climbing the ladder every time she needed something from the attic. Innumerable articles had collected up there over the years, piling one on top of the other. Hers. His. Theirs. Their daughter's. Their son's. Intermingling in dark corners, diverse articles mixing and mating. After all, a marriage that lasted thirty years is nothing to sneeze at.

"When we set the day for the sale of the house, I'll come to help you clear the attic," Shimon had said. "Who knows, we may yet find that famous treasure there."

Always polite, with a fine sense of humor. Yes, he is the kind of man who would leave his wife and home after thirty years, but not his sense of humor. Oh yes,

his sense of humor! How it would drive her out of her mind, especially in the most difficult and hopeless hours.

"Go away, Shimon! You and your nonsense. If we haven't found the treasure till now, we won't find it." She answers seriously, realizing that her face had assumed that particular expression that Shimon hated, the one he called "her philosophical expression."

When they bought the house (she fondly remembers the old real-estate agent who helped them get a mortgage because, she said: "So young and so in love; all the world loves lovers"), the neighbors spread the rumor that the previous owner had hidden money and gold ingots somewhere around the house.

"The old man did not manage to tell his favorite granddaughter where he had stashed the treasure because he had a stroke. It was well known that there were two things he did not believe in: banks and the IRS."

They decided to try their luck and search for the treasure. Gradually the search became a kind of game. They would run around the house, looking in all the nooks and crannies. Shimon, with a large flashlight in his hand, would shout like Archimedes—Eureka! Eureka!—and whip out an old candlestick, a faded photograph of strange faces, and similar finds. And with every find he would hug and kiss her and whisper in her ear, while nibbling on her lobe.

"Now that we're rich, rich like the proverbial Korach . . . Shh, keep quiet, lest the earth opens its mouth to swallow us."

Across the years, like a faraway scent, she can still sense the sweetness of his lips. Her bitterness intensifies. This is the wrong time for banter.

"We are about to liquidate everything and you are joking," she scolds him, but he refuses to abandon this light vein.

"What's the matter? Why are you such a sour schoolmarm? We'll have more to share. . . ."

Luckily they had put a light bulb in the attic: A flashlight wouldn't have been enough for rummaging through the ocean of junk and various articles that now lay at her feet. She is treading gingerly between these objects: an old vacuum cleaner, a defunct radio, a straw broom whose handle needs screwing in, a sharp-fanged pitchfork, a cookery set she keeps for the day her daughter will finally make up her mind to marry Dave and settle down, a spade with a broken handle and a pair of Shimon's old working boots. They were

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"his most comfortable pair," and he remained faithful to them even when the neighborhood shoemaker declared them beyond repair.

A nail stuck in her slipper and made her stop in her tracks. She bent down and her eyes lit upon a family photo in full complement: herself, Shimon, Yael, and Benjamin; all in their Shabbath best, erect as on parade, smiling artificially at the camera, the instant kind.

"A camera for impatient or hurried people," said Osnat who was taking the picture. It was at their 25th anniversary and Osnat, their Israeli friend, made them a present of a sterling silver frame, as befitting a silver anniversary. But the eagerness of the group to look at the picture—which was immediately put in the frame—the pushing and the pulling, caused the delicate frame to come apart, and then be relegated to the attic, with all the other objects in need of redemption.

Looking at the photo, Leah Falkovitch's heart feels heavy and she thinks about Yael and Benjamin, wondering how the children have changed in the past five years. The tidal wave that swept her then rises again before her eyes, threatening her life. "As in every generation . . ." she hears her father's voice echoing from another world. "Fathers and sons . . . there are always problems." But, she thinks, not as difficult as these problems. "They only seem harder to you because they are taking place now, in the present. . . ."

Benjamin dropped out of school and went gallivanting around the world with his carefree companions. He'll get by doing odd jobs, he said. "I want to learn from life, not old books." Shimon would then hurt his feelings, refute all his statements, cancel with one fell swoop his whole way of thinking, mock his entire existence. It was then that she started, for the first time, to wonder whether she still loved Shimon. No, she can't forget the moment she was so close to hating him. Every time the row flared up between him and Benjamin. A terrible row which progressed from words to slaps and finally to complete severing of relations between father and son. Then, after long sleepless nights of sorrow and tears, she realized that the bond between her and her husband had become nothing but a frail frame. Emotions that had lain hidden in dark recesses of her soul, notions her heart dared not lift to the tip of her lips, were suddenly breaking out.

She discovered that since she'd stopped seeing the world through his eyes they were looking at everything from different angles. The once united couple became two separate entities. She realized that the cumulative shared memories and experiences—the major binding force between them—could no longer hold them together because they were not the same people anymore. And one day, after a bitter argument, which as usual centered on their son (whom she was trying to defend), she summoned up her courage and told him

they had better separate, at least for a while, for a trial period. She could get a teaching job in California, and thus be closer to their son, who had settled there.

"What? What did you say?" She had never seen Shimon so flabbergasted. "It's all because of your damned studies! And to think that I paid for this craziness, for your goddamn degree. Independence, eh? Aren't you independent enough here at home? After 25 years of marriage you want out? Out of the question, do you hear. You must be out of your mind!" Then he spoke to her softly and all that night he cuddled and mollified her whispering in her ears sweet, forlorn words, until she began to believe that they would again be as before, that they "will see good times together," as Shimon promised.

FIVE more years passed and she held on to that belief, bucking herself, forcing herself to have faith, doing her best to please him, with cooking and cleaning the house after a grueling day at school, refraining from comment when he came home late and did not even call to let her know, smoothing rough edges at the first hint of an argument when his voice rose. Everything so as not to anger him. And as she was walking on eggshells like this, she kept reassuring herself that all was well, that their life was smooth and placid. After all, who is happy all the time? She clung to the hope that the embers were still smoldering and would one day kindle the flame: All you had to do was wait patiently, like those articles in the attic.

"Don't be impatient; you have to take a long view in life," she hears her father saying. "Waiting usually pays off" he said to her, flushed with happiness at the sight of his granddaughter, Yael. "You must wait for the liberating moment of salvation."

And then all of a sudden, on one gray Tuesday night, Shimon announced that in a week's time he was leaving. Just like that. Quietly, without raising his voice, without emotion. It's been brewing within him for a long time, he said, he just can't take it any more. He is getting old, yes, old. Here, just this morning he was looking in the mirror and saw a lot of white hair and his forehead is all furrowed. An old man's face. Who knows how much time he has left? His father died of a stroke when he was sixty, and he is already fifty-five. No, he doesn't know how to stop life's incessant flow; and the silt which goes on altering the color of the current. . . . No, you can't trust anything, not even yourself. Out of this confusion one thing is clear to him: He has got to be alone. To live absolutely free! By himself.

And what limitation on his freedom does he find at home? She wants to know. And what does "alone" mean? Really alone or just without her. She wants to ask and dares not. But he reads her mind. "People who are close can read each other's mind," he used to

say.

"There is nobody else, if that's what bothers you." And then he adds: "I hope there will be someone later, though."

So, you hope. You have decided, she wants to shout. And what about me? Don't I grow old too? Maybe I have something to say too? Am I not a party to this deal? But she is too stunned to even utter a word. It is clear that she herself had planted this seed five years ago, when she wanted to leave. It was she who showed him the way. It isn't fair! It isn't fair! Why didn't you let me go then? I was a little younger.

"A man only lives once," he says. Such a genius. Such bright new ideas! So new! "I have fulfilled my duties to the family. I shall go on paying for Yael's education. But I must leave, you understand. I suffocate here. You know only too well that our love died a long time ago. All our dreams have disappeared like Benjamin's chicken pox. . . ."

Now she finds her voice: "Then why have you kept quiet? Why didn't you let me go?" His eyebrows rise: "I was afraid. How can I tear myself off from all the familiar things, habits, connections, you know. After all I like you a lot . . . you must know that."

And how come you are so courageous now all of a sudden? she wants to ask, but can't find it in her heart. She dreads his answer, the pain that comes with the explanation.

If only she would have had more guts then, she wouldn't have reached this stage now. Perhaps if she had given vent to her hidden distress, she would have found a cure. If . . . if . . . and she falls silent again. It's too late anyway. It is not fair!

"It is not fair!" she cries out, but he is already outside the door. A week later he came back with a truck to take some belongings to a new flat he had rented. They haggled over every item like fishmongers.

"You can't take this statuette. I bought it with my own money. My first paycheck. You can't have it."

"But you gave it to me as a birthday present, have you forgotten?"

All the pain and bitterness in search of an outlet were as if disintegrated and transformed to various objects and articles. When the truck went away in clouds of dust and commotion, Leah was left alone in a house that looked like a battlefield—a terrible mess everywhere. Articles strewn on the floor all around, on the couch, on the beds. There were depressions on the carpet where the desk and chair had stood. A lampshade that was a casualty of the battle now lay torn and mutilated at the foot of the armchair. On the walls where the pictures had been wrenched away, there were now squares of wallpaper in deeper shades than their fading surroundings—like newly dug graves that have not yet suffered the ravages of time. Since then,

for more than six months, she has been living alone in the house that used to be theirs.

THE ringing of the telephone in the kitchen cuts short her daydreaming. Tonight is the Seder and she has not finished all the preparations. She hurries down the ladder and runs to the kitchen breathing heavily and shouting "I'm coming, I'm coming!" as if the other party can hear her.

"Hello? Who is this?" And on the other end, across a network of woven wires, "Hello, Leah?" But she still can't hear well.

"Shimon? I didn't recognize your voice. It's a bad connection."

The words she has uttered reverberate in her mind and she smiles to herself. If she goes on living by herself, she may end up telling herself jokes.

"Hello, Leah, it's a bad connection. Hang up and I'll dial again."

"Yes, the phone needs fixing again. I'll have to call the phone company after the holiday."

"Leah, I'm just calling to let you know I'll be a little late. About half an hour. Don't worry."

"Listen, Shimon, I don't want any surprises. You know Yael has to go back tonight, she has an exam tomorrow."

"Didn't I tell you not to worry? Just a little delay."

Now that they are deemed strangers, he can afford to treat her as a gentleman. Now that she is no longer his wife and he is not obligated, he feels relaxed. Oh, these interminable changes! Who would have believed, in the days of storm and strife, that the prodigal son who had caused quarrel and rift and had embittered their life, would someday patch up his relations with his father. After Benjamin's "rehabilitation," that is, an executive position in a construction company in California, contact was re-established between father and son. Since both travel a lot on business, they often meet briefly for lunch at some seafood restaurant in this or that city. Now they can talk "man to man," they have a common language.

To Leah's delight her son comes often to New York, so she can entertain this cherished guest. Yael lives in a dormitory near NYU, so she gets to see her at least once a week. Thank God, their children have lived up to their expectations. Both were shocked when they found out their parents were divorcing, especially Benjamin who harbored guilt feelings. She explained to him that he had no reason to feel guilty, that these things happen.

"Do you see these leaves?" she pointed to the mother-in-law's tongue suddenly noticing that it had grown by a few inches and was almost touching the ceiling. "First they grow jointly, slowly, in one direction, then their ways separate and the more they grow, the further apart they go. Something similar happens

with people. The trouble is that it takes a long time to realize it, and by then—the distance is too great.”

She worried about the children, their reaction, the impact the divorce might have on them. Now it turns out her fears were all unfounded. They were both so busy, so wrapped up in their own hectic lives, that they were soon reconciled to the new fact. They took it in stride, as they say. And she is happy, really happy about it. Only sometimes, in her heart of hearts, she feels a tiny bit disappointed: does she occupy such a small place in their lives?

Well, now it's her turn to feel guilty. What does she want from them, really? Yael talks to her on the phone a lot and visits at least once a week. But in all their conversations Yael is the center: her studies, her friends, her relationship with Dave, what's important to her, what she wants to do, what she likes. “How are you, Mom? Have you heard from Dad?” This is how every phone call starts, and Leah replies briefly that she's okay and would like to hear what's new with Yael. And she does. When her daughter comes to spend the Shabbath with her, she celebrates a day in advance, cooking and baking Yael's favorite apple tart, cleaning the house and even polishing the broad leaves of the mother-in-law's tongue to make their greenness shine. The house is filled with scents and warmth and the sweetness of expectation, as if for one moment, things had returned to their former glory.

Now, too, there is a fine holiday aroma in the kitchen. Leah puts down the receiver and takes a few deep breaths to still her pounding heart (her heart which recently, with weight-gain has begun to give her trouble). After Pesach she is checking into the hospital for a few days of tests. In the meantime, she has to watch her diet.

Shimon looks fine, athletic and agile. He jogs every day, rain or shine. After all, he has been running all his life. Back in school he was a racing champion. And how he used to chase her. . . . They were the first steady couple in class, in high school in Brooklyn. Yes, since they were childish teenagers. And then at City College, he used to follow her everywhere. In the evenings they would sit on the ancient yellow couch with the loose springs, and listen for hours to records that kept dropping on top of each other, so that Shimon did not have to get up from the couch. And then, the night of the raging storm when she could not go back to Brooklyn and stayed overnight.

They were so young when they got married. She left school (“anyway, I haven't made up my mind what I want to major in, so I can wait a little”), got a job as secretary in a company selling children's clothes, so as to help pay the bills while he continued studying engineering.

“Still, I don't understand why you quit school. . . . The Falkovitches have enough money from their 'deli

store, why shouldn't my daughter have a profession too?” thus complained her father, a bank teller who eked out a meager existence. And her mother, a sickly woman would sadly nod in agreement. Only twenty years later, when the kids had left home, did she go back to school, like so many other women in similar situations. And Shimon had the nerve to say to her: “I am the one who paid for your damned school.”

Leah throws a glance at the oven to see if the turkey is getting brown, sticks a fork in the steak to check its tenderness, then takes out the salads from the refrigerator: three different salads in decorative bowls covered in saran wrap. What else is missing? She realizes she has not taken out the Seder plate and the matzo plate which, because of their restricted use for Pesach only, have also been dispatched to the attic.

This time, she resolves, she won't let herself drift into daydreams. Time is short and she has to take care of several matters besides getting dressed.

It was not easy talking Shimon into coming to the Seder. “For the last time in our house,” she said. “For old times' sake, for the children's sake.”

She was not sure why it was so important to her. She could barely recognize her own voice, so choked with tears. “Okay,” he said, but only later, after she had signed the agreement at the lawyer's (their friend Barney Cohen, Osnat's husband). “Okay” he said, putting the signed document in his attaché case (the expensive leather one Leah had given him). “Let it be, for the children's sake.” But they both knew it wasn't for the children's sake, but for her own, and maybe a tiny bit for himself? Is it possible all he feels towards her is that natural kindness he shows to strangers? Is it possible that everything has been obliterated? Isn't she his children's mother? Oh, here she is clutching at the children again. . . .

The wine glasses and the Seder plates require thorough washing. Usage actually prolongs their life, since anything that is unused falls into obsolescence, decrepitude. “The heart is like a machine which requires use,” the doctor has said to her. “You must exercise, Mrs. Falkovitch—on top of your diet, not instead.”

She is glad she hadn't yet used the elegant tablecloth she bought at a sale in Macy's. Now she has a tablecloth for the Seder. And what good luck, the kneidlach came out very well. Ironic, isn't it? She has succeeded for the first time for the last time. How fluffy and tasty they are! Usually they come out heavy.

“If one of those should fall on your foot, you need a doctor,” Shimon used to say. “It's your thoughts that make them so leaden,” he would say. “Why can't you be a little lighter? What's the matter? Think about me when you are making the kneidlach, maybe that would help.”

She bought the gefilte fish in a jar, at the supermarket. Preparing them would be too much trouble. The

truth is that she hates cooking fish. That's why whenever they dine out Shimon ordered fish. In the orange enamel pot the chicken soup is bubbling and golden ringlets form on its top. For her this fat is harmful and must be avoided; for her it is almost *tref*. "This is poison for you, Mrs. Falkovitch," the doctor said.

The table is set and looks so pretty. Now to the bathroom, quickly. Leah likes to take long baths; she doesn't care for showers, except on hot summer days. "I am a bath person," she declares and divides people into bath and shower takers. Every evening when she comes back from work, after the long ride on busses and the subway, she fills up the tub with hot water, sprinkles sweet smelling foams and lotions and lies with eyes closed until every muscle of her weary body has loosened up. This is her moment of complete relaxation, shut off from the hubbub of the world, and able to drown the bitterness, the pain and the fear of the coming days.

Leah is so immersed in the "nirvana" that she does not hear the knock on the door until it is repeated vehemently.

"Just a minute," she cries, "I'm coming," wondering who it may be at this hour. How long have I lain here? Isn't it too early? It can't be Yael that early. "Just a minute. Who is it?"

"It is I, Doris Mackenzie. I've brought some clients to look at the house. I tried to call you but there is something wrong with your phone. It won't take long. Please open the door."

Wrapped in a house-dress and towel, she opens the door, her hair dripping. "We are celebrating a holiday tonight, Mrs. Mackenzie. You have come at the wrong time," she whispers to the real estate agent when the clients, a young doctor with his wife ("married just a month ago") are debating between themselves and measuring her bedroom.

"I know, Mrs. Falkovitch, but I am just as eager as you are to sell the house, and these are serious clients with cash. They don't have to wait for a bank loan." When she mentions "cash" her long red fingernails tap on the antique chest of drawers which is going to Shimon after the holiday, as agreed upon. "Good-bye and thank you," the clients smile, and shake her hand. "A very nice house. We like it." Thank God, it was a short visit. They leave, followed by the agent who keeps chattering in their ears.

The moment of truth has arrived. Leah picks up the magnifying mirror and starts putting makeup on her face. Tonight she has simply got to look beautiful. But why? What's so special about tonight? What could possibly happen? And why should she care? She keeps asking herself as she draws another blue line at the edge of her eye. Not too bad. Could be worse.

"When you put on makeup you still look quite pretty," Shimon had said.

"Is this a compliment?" she wondered, but he merely shrugged.

Pesach eve, Pesach eve, she whispers to herself, as if exorcizing something within. For a moment a scene from her childhood flashes through her eyes: at the hallway, in their tiny house in Brooklyn her father takes out the books to air them and her mother takes out clothes on hangers from the closet and hangs them on a line in the sunlit yard. Her nostrils seem to smell the aroma of the ancient books mingled with mothballs. Pesach eve. Soon they will all be here, soon. The blue dress, the one that "makes her slim" ("Leah, clothes don't make you slim or fat. . . . If you didn't eat so much chocolate, you'd get slimmer.") is lying on the bed. The material is silky and pleasant to the touch. Gently she puts her arms through the sleeves. She has to be careful with the long zipper in the back.

The last time she put it on, about a year ago, was on Osnat's 60th birthday. Shimon helped her zip it up. She still feels him stand behind her, telling her to hurry, his hand pulling up the zipper lightly from the small of her back up to her neck. She still feels his touch on her spine, a feathery tremor, like a breeze, like fingering on a keyboard, ever so gentle. How long do you feel an amputated limb after it is gone? Here and not here. There and not there.

Pesach is near, but not yet here, but she already sees its slipping away. Everything is yet to come, the table is laid, the soup is boiling, the matzo untouched, yet she already feels the aftermath of Pesach, the leaven taste inside her. She still has time, at least fifteen minutes before Yael comes. "There's nothing for you to do," Leah had told her. "I'll come early anyway."

Leah is all ready in her blue dress and pearl earrings (Shimon's gift). She picks up the newspaper so as to sit and wait in the armchair in the front room. But her eyes stray to the window. The forsythia is already in bloom with rich yellow flowers, heralding the spring; it is the first of all the plants to emerge even while winter still has dominion over the garden. A special, soft, light of early dusk fills the sky and is caught in the bottles that are lined on the windowsill, where the glass never stops changing shades as Leah, ~~waiting for Shimon and the children to celebrate the Seder, thought of the days and the nights from now on—alone.~~