

FROM FAR AWAY

By Rena Lee

WHAT ABOUT the story you promised to send me? The editor's voice reverberates in the telephone. She is silent. What should she say? How could she explain that the story had gotten entangled with many other stories that had become like one flesh, and she could not extricate it; not, that is, without tearing it off the others' flesh and hurting it so that it bleeds. "I still have to finish it off, there are a few problems." She starts to explain. "So finish it and send it to me."

He is in a hurry, someone is calling at the other end, somewhere at the end of all those wires stretching between her phone and his. The conversation is cut off abruptly. Placing the phone on its cradle she begins to muse. It seems to her that all human altercations resemble, in some way, cut-off telephone conversations, truncated thoughts, tattered emotions; that even the great events are only orphaned lines from unsung songs. Continuity itself is only a deception: there are only running dots following each other, giving the illusion of a line, while in fact, between each dot there exists an imperceptible yet unbridgeable distance. How is it possible to come so close yet never really touch? "A segment is only part of a straight line bordered by two points," the voice of her old math teacher echoes in her ears. A middle, that's all there is.

"So, what will happen in the end?" Her husband is insistent. When she does not answer, he goes on: "I'll tell you what will happen. If you don't pull yourself together, you'll 'go bananas.'"

Now she lifts her head and laughs. "Really?" She asks between laughs. "And I'd rather go strawberries. Either way you'll turn into a fruitcake." He is laughing with her now. "You and your Americanized Hebrew," she lashes at him. God, how different from the pure Hebrew of the "Réali" High School in Haifa that he used to speak in their early days together. And now, on a recent visit to Israel many took him for an American because of his Hebrew; they said he spoke like a tourist. At first he was a little embarrassed, tried to make light of it. "That's alright," he said; In the States they can detect his Hebrew accent whenever he speaks English. After it happened again and again there was no

longer surprise. One gets used. Thus, suddenly, the chasm opened and the distance, which before had been like a rolled up carpet stuck in a dark corner, now unfolded and spread in front of her eyes like a long, long road.

"Now, my prisoner, you can't escape me," whispers the youth in his beloved's ear, as he embraces her. She smells the scent of his body, mingled with perfumed soap and the odor of the sea. The two of them, bathed in passion and brine, are on one of the slopes of the Carmel. It was then that she first realized that the stars are not necessarily in the sky; they can be found right there at her feet, twinkling from the lights of the bay. Even today, after what seems like light years, through shut eyes, sometimes a star from that distant night twinkles at her, greets her. And sometimes, when she takes a deep breath, at the end of the respiratory tract, she seems to smell for a moment that distant perfume, which is all but extinct, like an empty perfume bottle which, though completely drained, still retains the scent which is part of its being.

Thus things repeat themselves and return to themselves. Whatever happens, you cannot detach yourself from what you have been, from what you are. Each new beginning is nothing but an imitation of the beginning that preceded it. And the origin becomes less and less clear. Its splendor is beclouded by dust storms. One seems to get further and further away from life itself and to start living in reflections and mirror images, as if in translation. So what is going to happen in the end? she asks herself as her eyes wonder, lost, among the crammed lines and stumbling on the empty page. Every year as soon as summer comes round, she flies to Israel. It is an old habit: the first step is to take the Israeli passport out of the safe, where it has been lying for a whole year, to check if it is still valid or needs extending. She peers at the face in the photo and feels strangeness. The seal of authority which certifies, as it were, her identity, has smudged her smile irreparably. Each time the face looks stranger, as if each trip contributes to the distance. From year to year she forgets how much time has passed, how much still is left.

Time always conspires with distance to delude her. It is so elusive! She has tried to stop its flow several times. Thinking she was seeing the tip of its tail, she chased it with all her might, then suddenly she seemed to feel its glare on her back, and heard its derisive laughter. Hallucinations. Why do you always imagine things? The man asks her again and again. Why give

Rena Lee is a Hebrew novelist and short story writer. The translation of "From Far Away" is by Marganit Weinberger-Rotman, who is on a year's Sabbatical in Israel.

yourself trouble? And she murmurs to herself inaudibly, "Why . . . because the sky is high and piggies can't fly. . . ." Did you say something? he shouts as if from a long distance, back in his world, in his den. When she does not answer, he gets up and goes to her, his hand touching her chin.

"I asked if you said something." His voice is soft. She knows he wishes her only well, but she senses the hidden tension in him. She is all too familiar with that contained resentment he feels every time he is wrenched out of his world in the den.

"Nothing," she says, "I said nothing." And she senses his relief. "Then be good to yourself, do you hear? Treat my wife well," he says to her and his face clouded a little, as if out of guilt feelings. And he is gone. Are those guilt feelings indeed? Or is she just imagining things. Like that night when she hurried to the front door to pick up what looked like the letter she was waiting for, but which was only a strip of light, a moon beam. She remembers stretching the palms of her hands and bringing them up empty, with only the shimmering silver light on them. She felt the pain for all that is forever unattainable, unredeemed, even by success.

This pain surfaces with a vengeance every year, in summer, when she sits with her childhood friend, on the beach in Tel Aviv. Her friend has a new wrinkle on her forehead which was not there the year before. They look at the sea from a café as from a gallery, sipping cold lemonade with long straws or drinking small cups of Espresso. They talk about what has or has not been in the past, and the years parade in front of them like portraits of departed loved ones. The azure sky above them is still kissing the lips of the earth with infinite passion. Wiser and cleverer now, they both know that the kiss is only an illusion. When they were little girls they used to race swimming to the horizon. With all their might they tried to reach it, until they realized that the horizon kept receding, running away to enticing expanses, forever unattainable.

IN THE summer she goes to Israel. Sometimes with her husband, sometimes by herself. The particles of her being—an American passport on the one hand, an Israeli passport on the other—she puts in her old handbag, which she keeps especially for these flights, together with the return tickets. Thus she leaves the house to go home. Here, her children, there, her parents, and she herself, her soul is part here part there. But as long as there is breath in her she won't quit, she will build bridges, she will try to sew together, and love shall conquer all distances.

At the airport, which she still calls Lod though it has long been renamed Ben Gurion, her loved ones are already waiting for her: father, mother, her childhood friend and her husband whose car will transport them

directly to her parents' house; there the table is already set, laden with cakes and cookies and the smell of aromatic coffee drifts from the kitchen. There is no elevator leading to the apartment on the third floor and so two problems: in the guise of two heavy suitcases—demand an immediate solution. She and these two suitcases of hers! Every year she tries to travel lighter, but to no avail. "What's the matter with you, you brought half of the U.S. again? Whatever for? Really now!" Thus her father remonstrates every year. And since nobody can carry such heavy suitcases up the stairs, there is no alternative but to open them, then and there, and empty their contents in the street. Thus they have to suffer the indignity of their innermost secrets exposed to passersby. If they have not lost their modesty at the hands of customs officers and security guards, they have certainly done so now.

In the meantime the women come back with empty bags and everybody joins in the effort to transfer articles from the cases to the bags. While this disembowelment is taking place, the suitcases lie open-mouthed, wondering why all this happening and whether this is why they have suffered such a long arduous journey. She herself is not treated very respectfully either: everything she has neatly folded and packed is now hurriedly shoved into the bags, creased and mangled. Everybody grabs and pulls: here a petticoat trails, there a tie hangs out, pairs of socks get separated and end up in different bags. Finally the weight of the suitcases has sufficiently lightened so they can be carried upstairs. The moment everybody has been waiting for has arrived: they sit around the table which is never large enough to contain the abundance her mother has prepared. Mouths mumble between sweets, and their eyes, the human eyes, are voracious too.

At such moments—such complete, supremely peaceful moments—she sometimes feels the torn threads surreptitiously heal. And everyone is careful not to spoil the moment, being so conscious of its fragility. "Do we really have to discuss this now? Won't there be enough time tomorrow? She is not leaving yet. . . ." And thus, imperceptibly, the rift has occurred.

Dad has aged lately, her husband says. He's quieter, more subdued, like an extinct volcano. But his mind is as sharp as ever. And she watches her father's clear blue eyes which seem larger looking at her with love and wisdom. He sits in his armchair equipped with earphone, the tape recorder, their gift to him, in his lap, his long beautiful fingers tapping lightly on his knee to the rhythm of the music. His face reflects transcendental bliss. "Mozart or Beethoven?" she asks, but her voice does not reach him. "Your daughter is talking to you and you're not listening," her mother calls in an angry voice. And to her she turns and says: "He's always like this when he listens to music." Her

mother has always regarded music as her rival, trying to snatch her man away from her. Father switches from earphones to his hearing aid. The expression of pleasure has left his face. He asks her mother: "Did you say something? Mother punishes him with silence. "I'm asking if you said something?" His voice is quiet but she senses the hidden tension, the contained anger that fills him every time he is torn away from the realm of music. His eyes light on his daughter. As if suddenly reminded of her presence, he smiles at her warmly and his face is filled with tenderness; he points towards her mother who disappears at the door and winks at her with mischief.

EVERY SUMMER she is greeted by the street where she grew up and each time she is taken aback by the neglect, by the old houses, the old people. Each summer everything seems to get more and more faded. Everything, that is, except the memories; they are so deeply buried that they are not subject to the scorching sun. I can't for the life of me see any beauty in this whole neighborhood, her husband says every time they visit. And she raises her head to him and smiles. How can he who grew up somewhere else understand? What does he know about the palm tree lot? About the secrets of the jasmine in back of the house? About the dandelions, the oxalis, the crocuses, the site of Saturday morning walks and so many dreams? What does he know about the sense of security her racing heart felt when she finally escaped her pursuers and reached her street? Gone is that blessed feeling that here she will come to no harm, that Daddy is here and he will take care of her. Her parents have aged lately. "I think it's hard for them to entertain us," her husband says. "You think they'll be offended if we stayed in a hotel next summer?" She knows he is not comfortable in this crowded place, in this bed. "We'll see," she says. "Maybe we'll find a way that won't give offense. We'll see next summer."

But their next visit has to be in winter, completely unplanned. It was her mother who summoned them, "Father is not feeling well, so you better come as soon as possible." That was what she said when father was already past feeling. Unless, that is, the dead can feel, something which she did not consider altogether improbable, perhaps because she tends to imagine things, as her husband claims. Under a grey sky they followed her father to his final resting place. That day there were many funerals at the cemetery at Holon. But they say it was not any different from other days: there are always many funerals, almost a death-factory. It resembled an assembly line. The announcements were heard contin-

uously: Now we'll start the funeral procession of the late. . . .

Only the pain makes the difference between the holy and the secular. Father left home and never returned. In the last few weeks, her mother says, he used to hum to himself an old Russian song called "Black Bird."¹ The words went something like this: "Why are you circling round my head, black bird, I don't belong to you. . . ."

Father was preparing for the road and the black bird was lurking outside waiting to follow him. Father went to pay his phone bill and never came back. The check he left for the phone company was the last document he left behind bearing his signature as if saying: I hereby settle all my worldly accounts. There will be no more conversations, from now on there is nothing to talk about.

Mother was left alone, a shattered person, like a blind man without a stick she wanders from room to room, her fingers feeling, losing their way. Occasionally she lifts an object and asks, "What is this? And this?" For years her vision has been failing and one eye is almost totally useless. Shirts, pajamas, ties and other finery that her daughter and son-in-law had brought from overseas lie in the closet collecting dust. They are all new, the cellophane wrapping unopened. "You know Father," she says placatingly. "He would cling to one shirt and never look at another, but he was so proud of your gifts." She looks at the collection that has accumulated here over the years and her heart is torn to pieces. At night, in her dream, two heavy suitcases drop on her and her father's funereal voice asks: "What have you got there, rocks?" She wakes up all her bones a quiver.

"He lacked for nothing, he only missed you," says one of the visitors who came to pay their respects during the *Shiva*. "He could not wait for summer to come round," says her childhood friend who had lost her own father many years back. "The last few winters he suffered from the cold," her mother tells her. "He really enjoyed the stove you bought him."

"What else could you do?" her husband insists. "You have to pull yourself together. . . ." And her best friend takes her by the hand to see the new promenade along the Tel Aviv coast. In the summer they will probably sit together again, facing the sea, looking at the horizon as if watching a curtain that hides other worlds. And who knows, perhaps if they are really good, if they wait patiently and quietly, in a minute the curtain will be raised a tiny bit and they will be allowed to peek. . . .