

On Wednesday, April 30, 2003, Rena and her mother have breakfast on Gordon Street. It is a beautiful day. The pomegranate juice is sweet. They head for the beach. On the way they pass a young army recruit in her olive-green uniform, chewing gum, rifle at her side. Rena notices her pearl earrings and the reddish-brown-and-gold Shulameth hair cascading out from under her orange beret. Her black boots are polished. Perhaps she is going to an IDF rehearsal for Yom Hazikaron, Remembrance Day, which will begin in a week. Rena likes the solemnity of that day as the fallen for Israel are recalled, everyone standing in silence as the siren of remembrance wails; and the way it flows into the celebrations and picnics marking Independence Day, when flags and pennants are everywhere and pride in the achievements of the young nation is irrepressible and air force jets streak across the blue sky in formation.

At the corner of Ben Yehuda and Gordon there is a store selling T-shirts. She notices one that says, "America don't worry Israel has your back," and manages a half-smile. Someone behind her, talking real estate, says, "If you miss it, you miss it, you know how life is." The story of Israel and Palestine, she thinks, is a story of missed opportunities. But then perhaps there is no room for both, just as there seems to be no place where Rena belongs, precisely. Oh, sometimes, she just wants to stop her brain, decouple it from whatever current keeps prodding it in different directions. Life is just one snake-oil salesman after another, hustling to make a buck. Not even Zionism could resist that. The Kibbutzim seem quaint these days, renouncing possessions, sharing their passion. Even the generals have brokers. Oh, the heat. Life is molten, like gold. She wants to be in a place so quiet that all she can hear is her breathing. She wants to live in a place that is not a "situation." She wants to swim out 200 meters into the ocean and dispose of all her pills, the pills that make her fat, the pills that steal her energy. The pills she hates. No, more than hates, hate is like love, it is more implacable than that. It is loathing. She wants a life within defined borders. Rena shuts her eyes. She can still taste the cardamom in the coffee. It fades slowly like the sound she loves of the ram's horn. You have to be perfect in a new country, almost armor-plated, in order to adapt and belong and survive transplantation. Dad worked so hard. Meyer dude with his data! He helped, day after day, to build Israel, a noble undertaking after all. This beautiful Hebrew language was dead a century ago! Mom learned Israel through its archaeology and guided tourists through the Israel Museum. That was also noble. They were good people. They were decent people. They did their best and fucked up like all parents do. An unhappy marriage is unhappier in an adopted land. It had not been simple for Pauline to remake her life. When Rena was nine, she prayed at the Western Wall for her ears to be pierced. Her cousin from Cleveland prayed for a Pontiac Firebird Trans-Am. Or was it a Mustang? The city hums. The children chatter. The malls murmur: Buy me, buy me, buy me. What's that cosmetic where body meets soul? All the dogs here in upscale Tel Aviv are groomed, unlike the stray dogs down in the Wadi of her childhood where the figs broke their skins in their ripeness and she tossed smooth pebbles into the brook. Before the aggression came and took over, the shouting and the shoving, the high-tech miracle with all its millions, cars nosing in front of each other, never giving way at intersections. Intersections, dreams of surgeons cutting into her, getting sectioned, admitted to hospital whether you liked it or not, Caesarian sections. She would wake up in a cold sweat.

What she can say to her mother to convey the raging in her mind Rena does not know. They stroll up and down on the beach beside the sea where the sand is firm and ridged. Police are everywhere, there has been another suicide bombing early that morning, at Mike's Place on the beach. Three Israelis have been killed. It could have been much worse if the security guard had not stopped the bombers getting inside. You can be dead with scarcely a scratch depending on how the shrapnel hits you. Rena tells Pauline about her weight issue, about her sleep issue, about her job issue, about her indecision issue, about her medication issue, about her Intifada issue, about her Iraq war issue, about her fatigue issue, about her psychiatrist-in-Jerusalem issue. She does not talk about the madness issue. That might be awkward. She was brushed with madness like a truffle brushed with cocoa dust! "Mom, I'm crazy!" Would that work? Nor about the fear issue, which comes and goes. "Mom, I'm scared shitless I'm going to kill myself!" Oy, life can be heavy. I am as insubstantial as lint. I've been scared all my life, Rena thinks. Yiush, she whispers the word, so lovely in Hebrew, Yiush – despair. Yiush-yiush-yiush, like the sea receding.

"What would you like to do? What do you feel like doing?" Pauline says.

"I would like to go somewhere else."

The words hang there in their vapor of ambiguity.

"Somewhere else?"

"Yes, Mom, somewhere else."

"You mean, like abroad?"

"No, Mom, not abroad, Israel is my home. I've tried that. Maybe a Moshav. Somewhere very quiet. I have to leave my job. Naomi is so good to me, and I love the kids in Jaffa, but it just isn't working for me."

"At least it's a job."

"But I'm tired. I don't want to take the Lithium any more. I'm flat."

Pauline is silent. She feels helpless. Perhaps, if Rena comes up to Jerusalem over the weekend, they can talk to the psychiatrist, see what Meyer thinks and plan some new course. That would be a good first step. The medication cannot be right if it just makes Rena feel awful. But then would she feel worse without it? They stroll back up Gordon. A shutter is slammed shut. Everyone is jumpy. At a café a man is seated with a notebook. The city is full of journalists covering the Intifada. To be paid to observe life, that would not

be bad. Rena thinks she might be able to tell stories even if she is not sure she could order the facts. Or decide what the facts are – because, ha-ha, here everyone has a different set of “facts.” She might be able to describe painful situations but she is not sure she could walk away from them afterward. Yes, life is molten, like gold. She is not sure she could turn it into stories.

Rena goes to work and that afternoon Pauline returns to Jerusalem. She is at dinner with a friend when her cell phone rings. It is Rena but she cannot talk. It is not the moment. Rena wanders the streets of a rattled Tel Aviv. She cannot think straight. Her footsteps cloy as if in mud. She feels she may fall. She will go to Jerusalem Thursday and talk to the doctor. That night she scarcely sleeps. When she lies on her left side she feels her heart thumping. Her mouth is dry, she feels hot, close to panic.

Thursday morning, a new month, May 1. It is spring, time of rebirth. No more bombs that night. What was that song they played at work whose first line was “Even on a heavy, hot day?” Rena crawls out of bed. May! Trees are budding. She forces herself to dress and go out and board the bus out past the Azrieli Towers with their sickly greenish glint. She gazes at them, as usual. The serried ranks of the high-rises are dense as organ pipes. They have never looked so hideous. She is late for work. She hates being late. She believes in serious, committed work. She believes in her Israel, a place at last where Jews belong, if only she could feel her belonging.

That morning, in a drawer, she has stumbled on a passage she had written down in Canada: “It is an individual choice how long you want to hold on to the tree of life, how long before you feel that you have shown your true colors and lived your life. If you have lived your life and had your moment then it will be much easier to let go. You will know and your loved ones will know your unique beauty and it will be something they remember and live with. Then you truly achieve immortality.”

Yiush-yiush-yiush: The whisperer-reaper who will not go away.

She will go on. She will persevere. The trees offer welcome shade on the Bar-Ilan campus. There is Naomi Becker with her big smile, such a good, kind woman. Rena thinks of the kids in Jaffa covering their faces with their hands in shyness, singing scales, learning how to measure time through rhythm, learning that there is a time for self-expression, and a time for another’s expression, and a time for joint expression. Music demanded mutual respect. It was a valuable lesson for children and Naomi knew how to convey it.

And now, in the way time skips for her these days, Rena is in Naomi’s cramped little office telling her that things are not good and that, for the first time, she will have to leave early. She is suffering intermittences. “I’m so sorry, I feel so low. I’m very upset about my medication.” She will go up to Jerusalem for the weekend, see Mom and Dad and the psychiatrist. Naomi tells her not to worry. Of course it is no problem to leave early. She is uneasy, however, and calls Meyer in Jerusalem.

Rena walks to the bus stop. In the distance a siren wails. The bus driver wears reflector shades. She closes her eyes. The city hums. A soldier's beret is tucked into her epaulette. Blue-and-white Israeli flags flutter here and there. Forgive me, forgive me. Kids with smiley cartoon figures on their T-shirts. Stay gold, stay gold. This is life, it is not a situation. The only life you have for all its obstacles. The bus lurches and sways toward the city. What do the suicide bombers think before they detonate themselves? I am going somewhere else. The moon is like a fingernail.

At the Ayalon, Rena gets out. The Azrieli towers, magnet-like, attract her. It will be cool in the past-erasing mall and fragrant and purring. It will be the opposite of the Israel of the kibbutzniks getting their fingernails dirty to change the land and change Jews at the same time. On the escalator into the tower she notices surveillance cameras. So there will be film of her. The store names and brand names and advertising slogans come at her in a gaudy torrent: SEXY SALE, CALL IT SPRING, TURN IT ON, KISS ME, IT'S A MAN'S WORLD, FOREVER 21, INTIMA LINGERIE, TAKE A DEEP BREATH, ONE LIFE LIVE IT WELL, BASIC IS BEAUTIFUL, IT'S A MAN'S WORLD, FOX BABY, MAGNOLIA, ZIP, REPLAY, CRAZY LINE, LIFE AIN'T JUST BLACK 'N' WHITE, IMPRESS, ELECTRIC SUMMER. Rena's head spins, she looks up at the sun slanting through the glass roof.

Mom and Dad will understand. It has been a long story and in the end an unbearable one. They will be better off without her burden. I'm sorry for causing such a commotion. She must go elsewhere in order not to create any further disturbances. Her cell phone rings. It is Meyer calling from Jerusalem. She hesitates but does not pick up.

Now she stands on the second-floor terrace. The warm wind is in her face. Two hundred feet below people move like ants on their set paths, disembodied little shapes. On the far side of the broad ring road a massive Israeli flag is draped down the side of a building. She presses her palms to those rosy cheeks. Independence Day is coming, picnics and gatherings and laughter. Israel will be 55 years old! And she will tumble, lovely cousin with an old family curse, down the length of the flag she loves.

It will be quick. It will be better. It will be over. The lark sings – and then falls. Rena-Renata Levin jumps.

When Yaakov, later that afternoon, identifies his sister's body at the Abu Kabir morgue, he finds a note in her bag: "Dad, I love you. Mom, I love you. Yakov, I love you. Yonatan, I love you. Uri, I love you. Stay gold."

That is all.