

# WHAT COLOR ARE THEIR TEARS?

## The Life and Work of Robi Damelin of Israel

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2014 Women PeaceMakers Program



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of San Diego®

JOAN B. KROC  
SCHOOL OF PEACE STUDIES  
*Institute for Peace and Justice*

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## **A NOTE TO THE READER**

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, and a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

## **ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM**

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.<sup>1</sup>

**BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER —**  
**Robi Damelin**



Robi Damelin is a spokesperson and director of the Women’s Group for the Parents Circle-Families Forum (PCFF), a grassroots organization of more than 600 bereaved Palestinians and Israelis who promote reconciliation as an alternative to hatred and revenge.

Damelin moved to Israel from South Africa, where she had been involved in the anti-apartheid movement, in 1967 following the Six-Day War (also known as the Third Arab-Israeli War).

In 2002 her life changed dramatically when her son David was killed by a Palestinian sniper near a settlement during his army reserve service. Her first words to the army officers who appeared at her door to tell her about David were, “You may not kill anyone in the name of my son.”

She joined the PCFF after David’s death. As a spokesperson, she travels with a Palestinian partner throughout Israel, the West Bank and internationally to share their stories and message of reconciliation. Damelin also returned to South Africa to learn more about reconciliation processes that have been in motion since the end of apartheid, a journey chronicled in the film “One Day After Peace.” The sniper who killed David was arrested in 2004, motivating Damelin to begin her own difficult path of reconciliation with him and his family.

As director of the Women’s Group of the PCFF, she works with other bereaved women to, as she says, “solidify our choice to use our pain to prevent further bereavement” and “strengthen women’s voices as facilitators of reconciliation in their communities.” The group’s exhibits — photography, culinary arts, embroidery and others — have traveled the world spreading messages of hope and co-existence.

Damelin is also a board member of the Charter for Compassion and initiated the Israeli Palestinian Narratives Project, “History through the Human Eye,” through the PCFF. She writes, “I continue on this path inspired by my deep sense of loss, my commitment to building a more peaceful future for Israelis and Palestinians, and my endless love for David.”

## CONFLICT HISTORY – Israel and Palestine

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most protracted in modern history. Both sides claim rights to the land, based on their particular understanding of history. Religion and politics play a part, but most historians agree that at its core, the conflict between Israel and Palestine is about land. Layers upon layers of civilizations can be found under existing cities and towns in Israel — some Israeli, some Palestinian. Whose land was it originally? That question has been difficult, if not impossible, to answer, and as a result is something that fuels the fires of conflict. While some Israelis and Palestinians strive to understand the other’s view of their shared history and are working toward a two-state solution in which each group maintains sovereignty and independence, others — within both groups — feel entitled to full control over the region.

Benjamin Pogrund, a journalist who lives in Israel and reports on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, writes this about the complexities of the struggle in his book *Drawing Fire: Investigating the Accusations of Apartheid in Israel*:

In Israel, the moral choices are many and complex and are a daily challenge. Each of the two main competing groups, Jews and Arabs, has right on its side, through history, land, religion, geography and tradition. The dilemma is how to satisfy their separate demands and aspirations to a tiny piece of land. The problem is bedeviled because in the long struggle between them, neither side has always behaved well, inflicting death and destruction on the other. Each side believes that it is in the right, and each side fears and rejects the other. Jews and Arabs are a mirror image of each other: each believes that force is the only language that the other understands; each believes that the other is trying to wipe it out. That there is some truth in these beliefs on both sides adds to the complexities.<sup>2</sup>

In 1881, Palestine’s population consisted of approximately 450,000 Arabs and 25,000 Jews. The first wave of Zionist immigrants — approximately 30,000 of them — arrived in Palestine in the late 1800s/early 1900s with the intention of establishing “a gradually expanding core of productive Jewish towns and agricultural settlements that would ultimately result in a Jewish majority and the establishment of an independent, sovereign Jewish state in all of Palestine.”<sup>3</sup> While European Jews envisioned a future Jewish State in Palestine, Palestinian Arabs feared a Jewish invasion.

The Balfour Declaration in 1917 was a British mandate aimed at establishing a Jewish national home in Israel, while purportedly protecting the rights of non-Jews. From the Jewish perspective it was a step toward creating a homeland; for Palestinians it was an anti-democratic document aimed at usurping their rights.

In 1947 the General Assembly of the United Nations recommended the partition of British-mandate Palestine into two separate states, one for Jews and one for Arabs. The Arab world reacted to the mandate by forming an Arab militia. Made up of several thousand Palestinian-, Lebanese-, Jordanian-, Syrian-, Iraqi-, and Lybian-Arabs, the newly formed Arab Liberation Army attacked Jews within Israel. Initially it appeared as if the Jews would be banished or killed. However, the tides turned in 1948 as the First Arab Israeli War began. Known as the War of Independence by Jews,

Palestinians experienced the conflict as *al-Nakba* — the Catastrophe — in which more than 700,000 Palestinians fled from or were driven from their homes.

By the end of the 1948 war, more than 6,000 Jewish people were dead and between 8,000 and 15,000 Arabs. Israel gained the majority of the Palestine mandate territory apart from Jordan. While no Palestinian state was created, Jordan occupied the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip. “The 700,000 to 750,000 Arabs who fled settled in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon; about 156,000 remained in Israel,” writes Pogrund (45). The 1949 Armistice agreements established demarcation lines between Israeli forces and Jordanian-Iraqi forces — known as the Green Line. Israeli Arabs lived under military rule, subject to curfew, travel restrictions, expulsions and detentions without trial.

Founded in 1964, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) emerged as a nationalist effort to establish an independent Palestinian state. To that end the organization has carried out numerous attacks internationally and on Israel and the occupied territories. The Israeli government, the U.S. government and many others consider it a terrorist organization. Members of the PLO consider themselves freedom fighters.

In 1967, violence again peaked in what the Israelis call the Six-Day War and Palestinians call *al-Naksa* or the Setback. Israelis established settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula. To the Jews who settled there it was an act of allegiance with the Jewish people, who had long ago set their sights on “coming home” to Israel. To the Palestinians who had been assigned life inside the Green Line after the 1948 war, it was a further assault on their rights.

Shortly after, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 242, which called for the “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict; termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area and their right to live in peace with secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.”

Years of intermittent fighting plagued both Jews and Palestinians until October 1973, when what is known as the Ramadan War by Palestinians and the Yom Kippur War by Jews was initiated by Egypt and Syria. Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal, while Syria invaded Golan Heights. After more than a month of fighting, during which Israel’s Prime Minister Golda Meir requested aid from the United States, in November Israel and Egypt signed a ceasefire agreement and in early 1974 a peace agreement. The agreement stipulated that Israel withdraw into the Sinai, west of the Milta and Gidi passes, and that Egypt lessen its presence on the east bank of the Suez Canal. A United Nations peacekeeping force established a buffer zone between the two armies.

In 1976 the Israeli government announced a plan to expropriate “thousands of dunams of land in the Galilee for ‘security and settlement purposes,’” which prompted Arab strikes and marches on March 30 that year. Military and police intervened and the day, remembered each year as Land Day, ended violently.

But in 1978 the world watched with hope as Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin came together to sign the Camp David Accords, which called for Israel’s withdrawal from the occupied territories and Arab’s recognition of Israel’s right to live in Palestine. An Egypt Israeli Peace Treaty followed in 1979. Under the terms of the Camp David Accords, Palestinians were to gain full autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza: “In order to provide

full autonomy to the inhabitants, under these arrangements the Israeli military government and its civilian administration will be withdrawn as soon as a self-governing authority has been freely elected by the inhabitants of these areas to replace the existing military government.” Most Palestinians felt that Sadat sold them out and that the promises of autonomy were empty. Jews in the occupied territories felt like they were being banished from their rightful homes.

Open insurgence broke out in December 1987 when Palestinians revolted against Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. An accident in which an Israeli truck crashed into two vans carrying Palestinians served as a catalyst for the insurgency. The Intifada — or uprising — later became known as the First Intifada and consisted largely of Palestinian men and boys who, lacking weapons, threw rocks and stones at Israeli soldiers.

In 1988 the United States vetoed a Security Council resolution that urged Israel to return deported Palestinians to the occupied territories and called for a Middle East peace settlement under United Nations auspices.

On March 6, 1991, President George H. W. Bush told Congress, “The time has come to put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict.” The Madrid Peace Conference, held in October, was co-chaired by President Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and was the first time all affected parties of the Arab-Israeli conflict negotiated together in one place. The meeting, however, did not result in immediate peace.

The 1994 Cairo Agreement provided for limited Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip within five years. Israel promised to withdraw partly from Jericho in the West Bank and partly from the Gaza Strip, within three weeks from the date of the signing. The Palestinian Authority was created, of which Yasser Arafat became the first president in July 1994.

The Oslo II Accords of 1995 called for Israeli withdrawals from Palestinian areas and expanded Palestinian self-rule. It divided the West Bank and Gaza into three areas, controlled by Israel, the Palestinians, or Palestinian civil authority with Israeli military control. However, the accords did not translate into real autonomy for Palestinians.

The climate worsened as Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist later that year. After several years of unrest and failed peace overtures — including the collapse of the Camp David negotiations — the Second Intifada began around the year 2000 and ended in 2004 or 2005 (the precise ending is disputed).

In 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip, leaving the territory under the control of Hamas, which went on to defeat the Palestinian Authority in elections there in 2006. In 2008, Israel launched a month-long military invasion, known as the Gaza War or Gaza Invasion, to try to halt cross-border rocket fire from Hamas and other groups.

Tensions erupted again in the summer of 2014, resulting in a 50-day war between Israel and Palestine. The inciting event was arguably the fact that three Israeli teens were abducted on their way home from school in the West Bank. A Palestinian teen was abducted shortly thereafter. Gaza launched rocket attacks into southern Israel and Israel carried out airstrikes against Gaza.

To date, there is no solution to the Israel-Palestine question. There are always two sides to a story. Who is right? Who is wrong? Perhaps the question to ask is: How can the conflict be resolved without assigning blame? And without more loss of life?<sup>4</sup>

## INTEGRATED TIMELINE

### **Political Developments in Israel and Palestine and *Personal History of Robi Damelin***

- 1915** Britain’s high commissioner in Egypt, and the emir of Mecca and king of the Arabs, exchange letters through which Britain pledges to support Arab independence if the emir’s forces revolt against the Ottomans.
- 1917** The British government issues the Balfour Declaration, supporting “the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish People.”
- 1918** Britain gains control over the area from the Ottoman Empire, and it becomes known as British-mandate Palestine. From 1918 to 1948 Britain governs over both Jews and Palestinians in the area.
- 1943** **Robi Damelin is born in Johannesburg, South Africa.**
- 1947** The UN General Assembly recommends the partition of British-mandate Palestine into two separate states, one for Jews and one for Arabs. Arab states reject the plan and violence erupts.
- 1948** On May 14, Jewish leaders proclaim the independent state of Israel, inciting the First Arab-Israeli War. The war is known as the War of Independence by Jews, who gained control over large tracts of land, and as *al-Nakba* (“the Catastrophe”) by Palestinians, more than 700,000 of whom fled from or were driven from their homes.
- 1948-51** **Robi attends Red Hill Academy in Johannesburg, South Africa.**
- 1952-3** **Robi attends Convent of the Sacred Heart in Potchefstroom, South Africa.**
- 1961** **Robi makes first trip to Israel.**
- 1964** The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is formed.
- 1967** In what Israelis call the “Six-Day War” and Palestinians call *al-Naksa* or “the Setback,” Israel gained control over territory in Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and begins establishing settlements in the West Bank, Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula. The UN Security Council passes Resolution 242, which calls for the “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict; termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area and their right to live in peace with secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.”
- Robi moves permanently to Israel.**



- 1971**      **Robi marries.**
- 1972**      **Robi's son Eran is born.**
- Palestinian gunmen kill 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Summer Olympics.
- 1973**      **Robi's son David is born.**
- Egyptian and Syrian forces attack Israel on Yom Kippur, followed by an Israeli counterattack. The fighting is known in Israel as the Yom Kippur War, and the Ramadan War to Palestinians. A ceasefire went into effect October 25.
- 1978**      Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin sign the Camp David Accords at the White House in Washington, D.C., laying the groundwork for a permanent peace agreement between Egypt and Israel.
- 1987**      The Intifada — or uprising — breaks out in December 1987, when Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza revolted against Israeli occupation.
- 1988**      The United States vetoes a Security Council resolution that urges Israel to return deported Palestinians to the occupied territories and calls for a Middle East peace settlement under United Nations auspices.
- 1991**      President George H.W. Bush opens a Middle East peace conference in Madrid.
- David is conscripted to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).**
- 1994**      The Cairo Agreement provides for limited Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip within five years. Pursuant to the agreement, Israel promises to withdraw partly from Jericho in the West Bank and partly from the Gaza Strip, within three weeks from the date of the signing. The Palestinian Authority is created, of which Yasser Arafat becomes the first president on July 5.
- 1995**      The Oslo II Accords call for Israeli withdrawals from Palestinian areas and expanded Palestinian self-rule. It divides the West Bank and Gaza into three areas, controlled by Israel, the Palestinians, or Palestinian civil authority with Israeli military control.
- Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated by a Jewish extremist.
- 1996**      Benjamin Netanyahu is elected prime minister on a platform of opposing the peace process and emphasizing security for Israelis.
- 2000**      A Middle East peace summit at Camp David collapses.
- Israeli right-wing leader Ariel Sharon visits the holy site of the Temple Mount, known to Muslims as al-Haram al-Sharif, in East Jerusalem, sparking waves of demonstrations and protests by the Palestinians.

The Second Intifada begins.

**2002      March — David is killed by a Palestinian sniper.**

March-May — Israel conducts largest military operation in the West Bank since the 1967 war, called Operation Defensive Shield.

**October — Robi joins the Parents Circle-Families Forum.**

**2003      Robi begins working full time with the Parents Circle-Families Forum.**

The Quarter on the Middle East — made up of the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia — release a “roadmap” for a peace process.

**2004      Thaer Hamad is imprisoned for killing David and 10 other Israeli soldiers.**

**2004-5     The Second Intifada ends.**

**2006      Robi writes first letter to Thaer.**

**2008-9     The Gaza War, a month-long military invasion, is launched by Israel to halt cross-border rocket fire from Hamas and other groups.**

**2009      Robi receives response from Thaer.**

**Robi returns to South Africa to film *One Day After Peace*.**

**Robi writes second letter to Thaer.**

**2010      Robi helps launch the “History through the Human Eye” project through the Parents Circle.**

**2014      50-day summer war between Israel and Palestine.**

**Robi travels to the United States to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.**

**NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF**  
**ROBI DAMELIN**

**For David, For Peace**

*You start a new kind of life when your son is killed.  
Maybe he's killed by a sniper, or a suicide bomber, or a bullet to the head.  
One day you're talking to him on the phone or hugging him or shouting at him and the next,  
men are at your door telling you he is dead. Part of you dies in that moment.  
Your whole life, all that happened leading up to his death, you now see from a faraway place.  
And a relentless void takes up residence some place inside you that can't be reached —  
until you meet other parents whose children have been killed.  
You meet men and women whose brothers and sisters have died.  
You find that you know them better than you've known your best friend or your neighbor —  
even though they are on the side of the people who pulled the trigger.*

*And then the most incredible thing happens. You understand each other's pain. And that is where the power is.*

## When Everything Changed

2002

Robi's story begins the day before David died.

It was March 2, 2002, and she had just finished lunch when her son called. It was Saturday, so she was home in her flat in Tel Aviv. She put down her book and looked at her cell phone and, seeing that it was his number, answered in an exaggerated British accent — one of the many affects they adopted when talking to each other. Sometimes British, sometimes Irish, sometimes French, the two shared a quirky, irreverent sense of humor.

“Hello, darling.” She let the “darling” hesitate a moment before rolling off her tongue, prolonging its impact. “Are you quite well or must I send a pint of whiskey for you out there? ... for medicinal purposes, of course.”

“Mum, hi,” he said. His tone was flat and, in turn, her motherly worry — worry she normally kept hidden behind a sharp wit and a tireless approach to work — came full front.

“Are you alright, David?” she asked, sitting up straight in her chair.

“Sure. Fine,” he said. But she didn't buy it, and that's when the pricking, numbing sensation began inside her.

“This is crazy, Mum,” he continued. “The checkpoint is mad, it's so dangerous. There shouldn't even be a checkpoint here. What does it solve?”

He was stationed at the checkpoint near Ramallah and had never before called her to talk about what it was like to be a reserve officer in the IDF.<sup>5</sup> He seldom volunteered information and when she asked, he would usually sugarcoat it.

“But you're sure you're alright?” she asked again.

“This whole fucking thing is just so messed up,” he said. “We're like sitting ducks here.”

After a while, having nothing sorted except that they had heard each other's voices, they said goodbye.

“I love you, David,” she said.

“I love you too, Mum.”

She pressed the “end” button and leaned back in her chair. It was as if something cold had just been placed in her gut and its numbness had already taken hold and was spreading outward. She sat still for a moment before she stood and began to clean the house, something she normally avoided. She dusted the tables, washed the dishes, scrubbed the toilets. Her body seemed to know that if she only kept moving, maybe she could outrun what was about to happen.

The next morning she woke early, only to find the dread still there, compelling her to move. She hurried to get dressed and rushed to the office, for once the first to arrive. She shifted from her office to the window to the copy machine and back to her office again, her focus fractured by her

need to stay in motion. She closed her office door and stood at the window, then sat at her desk staring at the pile of paperwork that she could not make herself read.

At 11 o'clock there was a knock at her door. For a moment she pretended she did not hear it and, for the first time since she hung up the phone the day before, preferred to be still. At the second knock, she rose and answered. Three men stood there, two officers with their neatly pressed uniforms and one civilian who was probably the doctor. They always sent a doctor along when they gave people the news. With erect posture and solemn faces, here they stood in her doorway, three emissaries who didn't have to say a word for her to know why they were there. Robi felt as if she had been plunged underwater. Sounds of telephones ringing, people talking — the sounds of everyday nonsense — became muffled and far away.

“Ms. Damelin,” one said.

“Get out,” she said. “I don't want you here.” Could she close her eyes and make them disappear? If she had only kept moving, would they have been able to reach her? Could she turn back the clock to set a different course?

“We're sorry,” he said. “We regret to inform you that your son David was killed by a sniper ...”

His lips kept moving but no more sound reached her.

“You may not kill anybody in the name of my child,” she said. She barely remembers having said it.

•

And that is the moment when everything for Robi changed, even her view of the experiences that shaped her. Why, instead of “blood for blood,” did Robi ask for peace, even in the first throes of grief?

### Animal Instinct

1948

Animals should not be beaten. Robyn knew that better than she knew anything, even at 5 years old. She also knew that it was no use waiting around for someone else to make things right.

“Go outside and play now, Miss Robyn,” Jenny said as she took Robyn’s dishes from the sun-filled breakfast room to the sink in the kitchen. Jenny was a good cook, though you wouldn’t know it, she was so small and thin. She wore the white starched uniform that all the servants in Johannesburg wore, and her skin was a beautiful dark brown. Robyn loved Jenny — and her nanny Grace, and Charlie who cleaned the house. They fed her when she was hungry. They soothed her when she was upset. They chided her when she was naughty (which was often). And most of all, they noticed her.

Robyn knew nothing, yet, about the first Arab-Israeli war that was taking place in Israel — where she would eventually live. She knew nothing about apartheid in South Africa, or the anti-apartheid movement that she would one day join. She did not know who Nelson Mandela was, or that her uncle would later defend him in the Treason Trial of the late 1950s. And she didn’t know that she would one day pay the highest possible price for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The world she knew in 1948 extended only slightly beyond her family’s home and gardens in the Johannesburg suburb of Northcliff.

Robyn had just finished her breakfast of steak, fried eggs, sliced papaya and fresh-squeezed orange juice. Her brother Anthony, two years her senior, had already finished and was off somewhere with one of his friends. Probably plotting some new trick to play on her, Robyn thought. Not long ago, she found him lying in the garden, calling for help.

“Robyn ... poison,” he had whispered from his place in the dirt, as he rubbed his hand on his belly, his breath coming in weak little puffs. “I’m ... dying.”

Robyn, with the gullibility of a little sister who wanted her brother’s approval, was terrified and ran inside to the playroom that abutted the garden to phone her father. It was a brave thing to do, though she did not think about it at the time. He was not the sort of father who would sweep her up in his arms to kiss her and hear about her day when he came home from work. Dark haired and handsome, with crisp clean clothes, he went to work and came home, and that was about all she knew of him.

She looked through the tall windows, keeping an eye on her brother’s body lying still between two lemon trees, and poked her small, shaking forefinger into the rotary to dial her father’s number at work to beg him in incomprehensible sobs to come home.

While Robyn was relieved at their father’s arrival in the garden, Anthony turned pale. He stopped moaning and writhing on the ground and did the most remarkable thing. He stood up and greeted their father — leaving Robyn to marvel at his sudden recovery. What happened next between her father and Anthony, she didn’t know. Robyn was so furious with her brother for not dying — and relieved and embarrassed — that she left to find one of the dogs. She would have been happy with Chinka or Morris, but it was Badger — one of the Chow Chows — she came across first. It was Badger to whom she told the whole story, crying into his soft brown fur. He understood

her fear and bravery and anger, and did not judge her for any of it.

Now, she wiped her mouth on the napkin and placed it on the table before getting up and pushing in her chair. “Thank you, Jenny,” she said and bolted out of the kitchen at a run, heading toward the front door.

“You know you’re supposed to walk in the house, Miss Robyn.”

But by the time Jenny’s voice reached her, the front door was already banging shut behind her. The sun was shining and the weather was warm, as it always seemed to be. The sweet smell of wild peaches ripening almost made her hungry again. Sitting down on the top front step, Robyn tipped her head back and let the sun warm her face as she waited for her friend, Barbara Fudge. Was Robyn thinking of what mischief she could get into as she waited? Her parents would probably think she was. And maybe it was true. She did not mind that they called her naughty because it meant they were paying attention.

Robyn saw Barbara round the corner and break into a run, waving her hand.

“Barbara!” Robyn waved back, thinking as she always did that her friend looked like the girl in her picture book, with wild ginger hair and messes of freckles. The two friends couldn’t have looked more different, but they shared a mad passion for animals.

“Today we will groom the animals,” Robyn said. “We are animal doctors and these poor dears have been abandoned. We must make them suitable so they will find homes.”

Robyn fetched grooming brushes from the garden and each of the girls grabbed a Chow Chow and started brushing. The dogs, much-loved family pets used to being handled, sat quietly as the girls worked the brushes through their long fur.

A bell rang, the tinkling sound of the dairy cart, and Robyn looked up from her work. The horse-drawn cart pulled up in the street in front of the house as it did every week. The horse slowed to a stop as the driver pulled on the reins. But as soon as the driver relaxed his grip, the horse stepped forward a bit.

“Goddam horse,” the driver said as he took a stick and brought it down on the horse’s back. Once. Twice. Thrice. The stick connected with the horse’s flesh and made a sharp, sickening sound. The horse’s flesh vibrated as if it was separate from the rest of his body, but otherwise the horse stood still as the stick came down.

The girls stopped grooming the dogs. Robyn had seen it before. The driver would beat the horse, and the large beast, with his shiny black coat and white-stockinged feet, would stand still with his flesh shuddering. Jenny would come out to get the milk and the driver would then whack the horse again before he resumed his route.

Robyn thought about how her mother had told her she was like a cart horse.

“You are just like them, you know,” her mother would say. “And so am I. You and I and the cart horses, we never tire.”

Robyn and Barbara looked at each other as the horse and cart and driver moved off down the street.

“It’s terrible,” Robyn said.

“The poor horse. What can we do?” Barbara said.

“There is only one thing we can do,” Robyn said. “We will have to steal him.”

Robyn could have told her father, who volunteered as chairman of the SPCA, about the abuse and he would likely have taken some course of action. But it never occurred to her to bother him about it when she was perfectly capable of dealing with the issue on her own. Besides, the false alarm with her brother and the poison was fresh in her mind. And hadn’t she been told that she was simply the naughtiest child ever?

The girls began to make plans. The next day they met under the lemon tree in the garden to decide on the best time and what they would need to steal the horse.

A few days passed. The girls had worked out all they could imagine — and today was the day. Robyn returned from nursery school early in the afternoon and ate her after-school snack as she went over the plan again in her head: some lifted carrots from the pantry, a long walk, a bucket of water and the tennis court in Robyn’s family gardens. That was the extent of it. Considering that she was 5, it wasn’t a bad plan.

Barbara met her at the house. The two waited for Jenny to step out of the kitchen before sneaking into the pantry. Barbara stood at the door to be lookout as Robyn found the carrots and took a bunch for each of them. They each tucked the tubers under their shirts before running out of the house to begin their walk straight down the main road. Robyn hoped that this was the direction of the dairy barn, as Anthony had told her, and she hoped the carrots bulging beneath their shirts didn’t rouse any suspicion.

It felt like they had walked miles though it couldn’t have been more than one, past houses with fruit trees in the yards, across streets where cars sped by. The sun had started to sink to the middle of the sky when the girls saw a building that looked like a barn in the distance. Hot and sweaty, but excited to rescue the horse, Robyn and Barbara drew closer. The smell of warm horse dung pricked at Robyn’s nose and she imagined the neighing she heard was the horse calling to her. The girls looked from side to side, and seeing no one, approached the barn door. They peeked in, and again seeing no one, moved as one toward the horse’s stall.

“Hey there, boy,” Barbara said and held a carrot out to the horse.

“Shhhhh,” Robyn said as the horse shook his great head and whinnied before taking the carrot between his big yellow teeth.

Barbara stood on tiptoes, reached up and unlatched the gate. Robyn took hold of the horse’s lead and the three walked out of the barn together, one large black cart horse flanked by two small girls.

The girls led the horse the return mile home, offering carrots and encouragement along the way, to the tennis court situated halfway down the hill behind Robyn’s house. Surrounded by a fence, Robyn thought the tennis court would be a suitable place for the horse. There was garden above and garden below and Robyn didn’t think the horse would be noticed. Once they’d settled him in his new home, Barbara went to fill a pail with water while Robyn petted the horse’s nose,



telling him about his new home and what it would mean to live in a place where he wouldn't be beaten.

"You are safe now," she said. "This whole entire tennis court is yours to use as you please."

Robyn heard the squeak of the gate opening behind her.

"Bring it here," she said without turning around. "I think he's thirsty."

"I suppose he is," said a deep, quiet voice.

Robyn turned to see her father standing in the entrance, looking bigger than ever. Barbara stood behind him. His face turned red and it seemed a long time before he spoke. When he did, he didn't ask any questions. He didn't seem to wonder why they had taken the horse.

"I'll have to call the police and they'll take you to jail if you don't return the horse," he said at last, not seeming to notice that Barbara moved past him to Robyn's side.

Robyn didn't know whether or not she would be sent to jail but she did know that she would not be allowed to keep her new friend in the tennis court. She turned back to the horse and put her face against his leg. She would have liked to reach higher — to reach his head — but she was too small. She felt his warmth against her face and a deep ache in her stomach. It was not fair, she knew that. It was not right, but she didn't know what else she could do.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into his leg.

Her father stood aside, holding the gate open. And the girls led the horse back to the dairy.

Not long after, Robyn was sent to boarding school.

## To Fly 1949

Robyn didn't think boarding school was a direct result of stealing the horse, but it probably contributed to the decision. She figured the last straw was likely the broken doll. A birthday present from her mother the previous year when she turned five, the thing was almost as big as she was. It was quite expensive and walked and talked — and it was the last thing in the world that Robyn wanted. She would have rather had another dog or cat or a budgie — anything but a doll.

Her mother must have thought she would be delighted — all girls wanted dolls, didn't they? And this doll was the best there was. The day it broke, Robyn had been walking in the garden with the nanny, the doll walking dutifully beside her when she accidentally let go of the doll's hand and it fell to the ground. That was the end of it. She wasn't sad about breaking it but really, she hadn't intended for that to happen. At least she didn't think she had. But it made her mother angry and it was decided shortly thereafter that Robyn would benefit from boarding school, where she would learn elocution, dancing and manners. Robyn thought she already had good manners. She always said "please" and "thank you" and never talked with her mouth full. Sure, she got into a bit of trouble occasionally and fought with Anthony but she was never ill-mannered about it.

Though she didn't understand the point, Robyn knew she had no choice in the matter. She decided to think of it as a great adventure. And because of the necessary shopping to prepare for school, she would have her mother all to herself for an afternoon. Later, when she had become a mother herself, she would wonder at how her mother could ship her off like that. Why she didn't seem to want to spend time with her. Now, it is inconceivable to her, but at the time it simply *was*.

The two drove to John Orr department store, where her mother consulted the "things to buy" list the school had given her. Robyn's uniform consisted of a red and white spotted blouse and a grey pinafore dress with flared skirts. The matching blazer sported the school's crest — a builder's trowel and eagle's wings with its motto, "Free to Build," underneath. But the best part of the uniform was the hat: a straw "boater" hat with a red band. It was the most elegant thing Robyn had ever seen.

"I look quite smart, don't I, Mum?" Robyn said later as she dressed in her uniform, ready for her introduction to Red Hill School.

The school was in a place called Morningside, in the countryside just outside of Johannesburg. As the car drew up to the school, Robyn took in what would be her new home. It felt expansive, with its thatched-roofed buildings surrounded by woods and fields. She did not know that this was the first of several moves she would make before she turned 18. She did not know that here, her creativity and impulsive nature would land her in trouble — and help her survive.

"We are the girls of Red Hill, tally ho!" A group of girls of varying ages and sizes — all dressed identically to Robyn — passed the car in single file on their way to who knows where.

The head mistress, Miss Thompson, gave Robyn and her mother a tour of the property. They walked through dormitories, classrooms and a library. Out further were the tennis courts, soccer fields, rabbit hutches and horse stables. Robyn lingered as they passed the stables, comforted to know there would be animals nearby. (She would later be delighted to learn that Miss Thompson

also had two Burmese cats she could visit on occasion.) The swimming pool was more of a muddy hole in the ground, its water green and uninviting, but otherwise the place didn't look too bad.

The tour completed, goodbyes said and her mother gone, Robyn looked around the dormitory room that she would be sharing with 19 other girls. There were rows of metal-framed beds with thin horsehair mattresses covered with wool blankets. In between were tall, narrow cupboards for the students' clothes and schoolbooks. Though the room was filled with beds and cupboards, it felt sparse. Soon, in pairs and trios, the girls came to put away their books and prepare for dinner. The girls' laughter and chatter, which probably sounded friendly and warm to anyone passing the room, made Robyn feel invisible. They all looked older, as indeed they were. Although there would be girls her age in the classroom, Robyn was the youngest girl to board at Red Hill.

Being invisible was not something Robyn tolerated. With a flash of inspiration she decided on the thing that would be sure to impress her new roommates. As they began to file out of the room, Robyn stood up from the bed and cleared her throat.

"I can fly," she blurted to the girls' backs.

But she hadn't spoken with enough volume and it was as if she hadn't said the words at all. Perhaps she was in need of elocution lessons after all, but since she did not yet know what elocution was, she relied on the instinct that was nudging her to be louder.

"I can fly," she said again, louder. And this time the girls stopped and turned around to face her.

With all eyes on her, Robyn wondered if claiming she could fly really was that great of an idea, but she was committed now. And there was nothing to be done but prove herself — show that she indeed possessed this super power she had just decided she shared with the birds.

"I'll show you," she said.

Robyn climbed up on the bed, reached above her and gripped the edge of the cupboard where her clothes had so recently been hung. Used to climbing trees and swimming and running, it was easy for her to place one foot on the window sill above the bed's metal headboard and hoist her small body up to the top of the cupboard where she stood looking down at her audience. The room was quiet. Robyn took a breath.

"See?" she said, and jumped off the cupboard, spreading her arms as if they were wings.

For the second or two that she was airborne, Robyn felt the same freedom and power the birds must feel. She felt a sense of satisfaction that she would be respected and admired. She felt hopeful that she would not be pitied or looked down on for being the youngest girl in the dorm. Then she felt the impact of the mattress before it gave way and she crashed through the bed's metal springs onto the floor.

She does not remember now what the girls did when they saw her fall through the bed, or how badly she was hurt, or how great the damage was to the bed. It was all so long ago. But she had certainly been noticed. Her roommates could hardly have seen a young girl fly and not been impressed.

## Welcome Home

1951

Robyn had lived at Red Hill for two years and was becoming used to the routine of living most of the year away from home. The summer holidays were about to begin, so Robyn said goodbye to her friends and waited for her father's driver to pick her up to take her home. She looked forward to staying in her own room, in her own bed, and not listening to the sound of 19 other people sleeping.

The smell of mieliepap and gravy was the first thing to greet her as she walked in the door. That Jenny would make her favorite dish made Robyn feel special. Then the new housekeeper greeted her and the feeling of warmth instantly evaporated. Robyn had met her the last time she was home and had not cared for her. Perhaps she was nice enough once you got to know her, but Robyn was not interested in finding out. The woman did not like having animals in the house and that, Robyn thought, was about all she needed to know about her.

"Where is my mother?" Robyn asked as she put her bag down on the floor, wishing she could make the woman disappear just by looking at her.

"Your mother is gone," the housekeeper said.

"Gone?" Robyn asked. "When will she be back?"

"Your mother is gone," she repeated.

What she meant, it turned out, was that her mother had moved out months before and no one had bothered to tell her.

It was strange living at the house without her mother. Not that Robyn had spent much time with her when her mother had lived with them, but just knowing she was there gave Robyn a sense of security. In actuality, Robyn saw her mother more now. On summer weekends she and Anthony visited her at their grandparents' flat where she was staying, and it was all very exciting. Her grandmother, a spiritualist medium who would hide in her bed when guests arrived but invited the children to séances, seemed mysterious. And even her grandfather, who neurotically checked their fingernails before meals to make sure their hands were clean, was a novelty. Her mother was there too, participating and interjecting wild ideas of her own. But it was not enough. It was not the same as living in the same house as her mother.

Fall came and Robyn was glad to return to school where the "naughty" title she'd been given seemed to pick up speed. She wasn't too sure, however, that what she was learning at Red Hill was going to be all that useful to her. She learned deportment, which she practiced by walking with a book balanced on her head. She learned Margaret Morris dances on the lawn in front of the school as the music teacher played the piano. She played hockey and tennis and excelled at sports. And when she wasn't balancing, dancing or hitting balls and pucks, she was leading the other children in mischief. She led raids to the neighbors' fruit trees to steal figs and oranges. She awakened her roommates at midnight to sneak to the tuck shop where they would find their tuck boxes filled with candies and cakes from home and feast on them until their stomachs hurt. It seemed she was in the head mistress's office as much as she was in the classroom.

Little did she know then how Red Hill would shape her future. How she would one day move in wide circles of people, from country to country. How she would communicate things about David in a way that stirred people's hearts toward peace. Back then, all she understood was that she felt adrift — and was fighting it in the only way she knew.

But more change was around the bend. Three years into Red Hill, the year Robyn turned 9, her parents moved her to a convent. Perhaps they thought a convent could succeed where the private school could not. Perhaps they felt a stricter environment would teach her to follow rules. Robyn didn't know.

What she did know was that, again, she must make a new place her home, the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Potchefstroom, more than 100 kilometers away. This was her new home, this place where uniforms were little more than belted potato sacks. No more smart uniforms with the cherished boater hats. No more midnight adventures to the tuck shop. Here, she was one of two Jewish students among throngs of Catholics. Here, nuns encouraged her to go to synagogue with the other Jewish student, despite the fact that she would much rather have gone to Mass — with its incense and chanting and a sense of belonging.

What else does she remember of her years at the convent? She remembers the kindness of the nuns. She remembers the dreary building. She remembers that there were no animals. She does not remember much more than that.

### What Injustice Looks Like

1954

Two years after moving to the convent, when she was 11, Robyn's father made an announcement.

"Guess what?" he had said when she was home for a visit.

"I dunno. You're buying a new radio?" Robyn guessed.

"I'm getting married," he said.

Robyn had grown used to the rhythm of the convent and the gentleness the nuns offered her, and did not want to leave. But two months later her father sent a driver to pick her up for the wedding, her bags packed for the move home. It was there, at the wedding, that she met her stepmother Rhoda for the first time.

"Now that you have a stepmother, you can live at home," her father had said.

Looking back, Robi understands that Rhoda never had a chance with her. Never having had children, she didn't have a clue how to deal with Robyn and her brother. But in those days, Robyn couldn't stand her, with her culture and money and concern for what the neighbors thought. And Robyn had not yet learned about the power of reconciliation, though she was quite aware of what injustice looked like.

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"You mean you don't know how to read?" Robyn said to Charlie one morning as he dusted the antique buffet her stepmother had brought when she moved in. So many new pieces of furniture. So many expensive pieces of art. Robyn felt like she was living in a museum.

"That's what I just said, isn't it?" he said.

Charlie was never short-tempered with her and the sharp sound of his voice made Robyn's eyes water. She depended on his friendship even more now that she had to live with her stepmother. She'd never met anyone who pretended to faint as much as Rhoda did. Next time she tried it Robyn planned to dump ice water on her.

"But ... ?" Robyn began. She hadn't meant to embarrass him. She was only making conversation.

Charlie was usually calm, and she always felt better about things after a chat with him. Before she moved to Red Hill, he would take her to the servants' quarters and let her eat with him. When she came home on vacation he would ask her what she learned. Even now, the memory of Charlie repairing the roof above her father's bedroom a few years back and falling through it to land on her sleeping father made her dissolve into hysterics. Besides the animals, she thought of Charlie as her best friend.

"Why don't you go practice the piano, Miss Robyn, and stop bothering me," he said.

She wanted to ask him what was wrong, what she'd said that had hit a nerve, but her gut was telling her to leave it. She ran to her room, slammed the door and began to play the Grieg piano concerto as loud as she could.

"Robyn!" her stepmother yelled from her room. "Can you please keep it down?"

Robyn played even louder, thinking about how she and Anthony planned to eat the food Rhoda had asked the servants to prepare for a dinner party the next day. Then she began thinking about how ridiculous it was that Charlie had to be a servant just because he was black. The angrier she got, the louder she played. Why was it that he had to live so far away from his family and send his whole paycheck home every month and seldom got to see them? Why was it that he didn't know how to read although he was older than her father? She played until the anger had faded and she had decided what to do.

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Sitting at the kitchen table with Charlie in the afternoons, schoolbooks from her earlier schooldays spread open before them, Charlie would repeat after her. "A is for apple. B is for ball."

It only took a few weeks and he was putting words together. "Sound it out," Robyn would say as, in stops and starts, Charlie read "Dick and Jane's: We Come and Go" primer for the first time.

"See Dick go. See Jane go. Go, go, go," Charlie read, and then lowered the book to the table.

"Keep reading," Robyn said.

Charlie looked up at her and folded his hands over the book. He stared at her for a few moments.

"Go on," she said. "Why don't you finish?"

Sun streamed in the window over the kitchen sink where Jenny was peeling potatoes. Since the lessons took place in the kitchen, Jenny was usually there too, in the background. It never occurred to her that Charlie might have minded the audience, but it was the only place that made sense. She certainly couldn't have used the formal dining room, the forbidden territory saved for guests and dinner parties. Although she wouldn't have minded annoying Rhoda, she didn't want to get Charlie in trouble.

Robyn waited for him to answer, anxious to get back to her room to practice her cello.

"Thank you, Robyn," Charlie said.

Then he picked the book back up and found the place he left off, tracing his finger over the words as he read. "Oh, Dick. See Baby Sally. See Baby Sally go."

### From South Africa to Israel

1961

“Do you mean to tell me that you want to be an ... *actress*?” The way the word came out of her father’s mouth made it sound like she had just announced plans to open a bordello.

The three of them — Robyn, her father and Rhoda — were having dinner in the formal dining room. The lighted candles on the center of the table cast shadows on her father’s and stepmother’s faces, which to someone else might have seemed soft and muted, but to Robyn looked hard and immovable.

“It’s not like I’m going to head out on the road,” Robyn said as she returned the fork full of stew she had been about to eat to her plate. It seemed she never felt full anymore. Since she moved home when she was 12, she kept gaining weight and was starting to dislike herself as much as she disliked the two people sitting at the table with her.

Her father made a sound not unlike a snorting horse and took another sip of wine.

Anthony was now at Wits University, so that left Robyn alone to deal with them. Thank god she had her music. At the old house, she had unleashed herself on the piano but in this newer, swankier place Rhoda had selected for them, Robyn no longer had a piano. The guitar and cello became the outlets for all her hope and angst.

“I want to register for Cape Town University in the spring,” she continued. She could feel herself starting to lose control. “I want to *study* dramatic art.”

“You are not going to study *dramatic art*,” he said. His voice got quiet, mocking, and dropped an octave. “You will study something respectable and say no more about this nonsense.”

“I ...” Robyn began.

“Enough!” her father shouted as he glared at her from across the table.

Robyn’s hands began to shake. She placed her fork on one side of the plate and her knife on the other. She picked up her napkin and folded it once in half, and then again, stood up and placed it on her chair. Without saying another word and with her gaze fixed on her father, Robyn picked up her plate — still filled with stew — and hurled it across the table at him. She then turned, walked quietly out through the dining room’s elegant French doors and up the marble stairway to her room.

She put a few items of clothing in a bag, grabbed her cello and started to walk to her mother’s flat. Through the dark streets just outside Johannesburg she marched, propelled by anger, unconcerned that it was a dangerous place to walk alone at night. Instead of the long walk ebbing her temper, her indignation grew as she made her way into town. By the time she had walked the few miles to her mother’s flat, she had decided she would not even finish her schooling. Robyn made a grand entrance to her mother’s small one-bedroom flat, cello in one hand and suitcase in the other.

“I have decided to live with you,” Robyn said, as she set her things down in the entry. “And I’m not writing any more exams. I don’t give a damn.”



Living with her mother was different. It wasn't that her mother knew any better what to do with her than her father and stepmother did, but she gave Robyn more freedom. Ever since her parents had divorced, Robyn had been fascinated by her mother's unconventional lifestyle. Her mother had taken her to forbidden gay parties and weddings, toga parties and convertible rides. Her mother's boundless imagination had acted like a magnet for Robyn when she was a child and now here she was, finally living with her.

But by now, 17-year-old Robyn had no desire to piggyback on her mother's life. And though her mother gave her some freedom, there were a few rules, and Robyn paid no more attention to her mother's wishes than she had to her father's and stepmother's.

Robyn had been living with her mother for several weeks when there came a knock at the door. The two had finished dinner and Robyn was in the living room, which doubled as her bedroom, playing the guitar, working out the chords of "We Shall Overcome," one of the rallying songs of the anti-apartheid movement. She didn't know a lot about the movement, but more and more her friends were becoming involved, and her awareness of apartheid and sense of its wrongness was growing.

"Hello. Is Robyn here?"

From her vantage point on the sofa, Robyn couldn't see who it was but she recognized the voice. It was the boy she'd been dating, the boy her mother knew nothing about, the Indian boy whom she'd met running his family's fruit and vegetable shop. It wasn't because it was illegal that she hadn't told her mother about him. It was just that they didn't talk much those days. The topic hadn't come up.

"We don't want any vegetables," her mother said to the boy.

"No, no," he said. "I came to see Robyn."

Her mother's back was to her, but Robyn could imagine the expression on her face when she realized that he was here to pick up Robyn for their date. Robyn knew she could end up in jail for dating him but she didn't care. She also knew, however, that her mother *would* care. Not because he was Indian but because of the danger it posed for them to be seen together. Her mother reached out, grabbed the boy's arm, pulled him inside and shut the door.

"Robyn," her mother hissed, still holding the boy's arm. "Do you two know what you're doing?"

"Yes, mother, we do," Robyn said. "We're going out to dinner." And Robyn grabbed her jacket and walked out with her boyfriend to find a restaurant in Indian town, where they would less likely be reported for their inter-racial rebellion.

Robyn didn't pay attention to what she was expected to do in those days — or to what was

safe, for that matter. Friends of hers were jailed for activities in the communist party. She didn't know enough about what they stood for to care one way or the other about communism but they were her friends and so she visited them in jail, unaware that even her association with them was a danger.

When Robyn returned from dinner that night her mother met her at the door.

"You've got to start thinking about what you're doing, Robyn," she said.

Robyn shrugged her shoulders and walked past her, not realizing how truly dangerous things in South Africa were becoming in 1961.

Not long after, there was another knock at the door. Again, the caller asked for Robyn.

"Uncle David!" Robyn ran to greet him when she realized who it was. David was one of her favorite uncles.

Her mother invited him in and offered him a cup of tea. He took a seat in the living room.

"Why do you want to see me?" Robyn asked. He came by on occasion but never just to see Robyn.

"Just listen to him," her mother said before she left to make the tea. "It's for your own good."

This all sounded so serious. Robyn sat across from him in the living room and leaned back in her chair, preparing herself to hear whatever was so important that it required a special meeting. It couldn't be good, that much she was sure of. Her mother gave David his tea and started to pour a cup for Robyn, but Robyn shook her head.

"On behalf of your father, I'm here to offer you your options," he said. He looked nervous; beads of sweat began to form on his forehead and although Robyn was a bit nervous herself, she couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"You may study medicine, law or accounting at Cape Town ... or ..." He took a sip of tea and Robyn felt her stomach tightening. The thought of being a lawyer or accountant sounded like a prison sentence. "You may go to Israel," he finished.

Relieved, she found herself smiling. "Of course I'll go to Israel," Robyn said.

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A few months later Robyn arrived in Be'er Sheva, Israel, the bulk of her knowledge of Israel gained from the movie "Exodus," and the bulk of her knowledge about Be'er Sheva from the counselor in South Africa who helped her select it as the place she would study Hebrew. ("It's a very exciting place," he'd said, "a future metropolis.") With dreams of an expansive new life in a budding

metropolis, Robyn looked out the window as the train pulled to a stop. On the curb of the oversized avenue sat an Arab man, dressed in the traditional white Bedouin thobe, an earth-colored kufiya on his head. Beside him stood a camel, with blankets and bundles strapped to its back.

As she disembarked the train, dust adhered to her high-heeled shoes and best traveling clothes. Used to the beauty and luxury of South Africa, she found the barrenness of the desert unnerving. She hired a cab to take her to the Ulpan where she would live and study. The room she would share with another girl was on the second floor. It was small and had two beds, one already covered with what she assumed were her roommate's things. She put her bags on the vacant bed and stood at the window, taking in the surroundings. The view consisted of a British cemetery with row after row of ashen gravestones. This is the future metropolis? Camels and gravestones? Robyn wondered what she'd gotten herself into and felt the old sense of being sent off to an unfamiliar home.

Robyn turned her attention to her suitcases to begin unpacking. She placed her toiletries on the small dresser beside the bed and retrieved hangers from the closet. As she took out the dress from the top of the case and unfolded it, she felt something stiff in its collar. Wondering what it could be, she sat on the bed and worked the collar between her fingers, finding what felt like paper stuffed inside. She retrieved her cuticle scissors from the dresser and popped open the stitching. There, sewn inside the collar was money. Stacks of South African rands. There was no note to tell her who it was from but Robyn knew who had put it there — the person who had done her laundry and packed her things every time she'd gone away. This time, instead of sending his month's salary home to his family, he had sewn it into her dress. And she no longer felt so alone.

## From Conflict to Conflict

1961

Robyn lasted six months in Be'er Sheva. She spent her days sleeping through Hebrew class and her nights at a bar not far from the dorm. Bar Sheva, as it was called, was run by a charismatic, skirt-chasing singer — and Robyn reveled in the excitement and acceptance the man offered her. She became a regular there, where she drank whiskey, smoked cigarettes and absorbed the defiant tunes sung by its artists. At times, the music took her to those private contemplative places within, and at others it emptied her of all thought as she danced until morning. In a haze of smoke and booze, Robyn found Bar Sheva to be a place of escape. It was a place where the counterculture of folk music took root in her, music that would soon be at the heart of her efforts in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Standing against the inhumanity of apartheid would be a cause at which she could direct her discontentment with the injustice she saw around her. But it would only be a partial effort; Robyn did not yet know what full commitment looked like. She did not know that she would be stripped of all that matters before she could connect with the desperation and fear that lives in the heart of conflict. For now, the desire to make a difference, and to belong and to rebel, were braided together inside a young woman who could have been anyone, anywhere, standing at the cusp of adulthood.

After months in the desert town, with its restless nights and sleepy days, she woke up one morning and thought: *What am I doing in this ghastly place with all these mad people and nothing to do?*

That same day she packed her bags, took a train to the airport and returned to South Africa. Her father awaited her when she stepped off the plane. Clad in an unwashed camel-colored duffle coat to which months of cigarette smoke clung, she had probably gained another 10 kilos since he'd seen her. Her wayward hair stuck out from her ponytail in bristly strands. She could read the disapproval on her father's face as clearly as if he had been carrying a sign, and the feeling of satisfaction his expression gave her was almost worth the dissatisfaction that fueled her appearance.

“Robyn,” he said as he moved with his arms outstretched.

She moved back a step. Damn if she was going to let him give her a fake hug.

“It's ‘Robi’ now,” she said, the new version of her name a declaration of her intention to build a new identity — though what that would look like, she had no idea.

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The next several years in South Africa for Robi were, in some ways, frenetic. She worked as a human resources rep at 20th Century Fox, as an administrative assistant and docent for a British war museum in Johannesburg, and traveled abroad with her mother. With aspirations of being the South African version of Joan Baez, she bought hair extensions and began performing anti-apartheid folk songs at coffee houses and bars throughout Johannesburg.

But violence and tensions were mounting in South Africa, as the anti-apartheid movement gained momentum and the foundations of apartheid began to crumble at last. The government's increasing pressure on its citizens seemed proportionate to the mounting threat to its waning control. When Robi returned to South Africa in '61, anti-apartheid activists could be detained without trial for 12 days. Not long after, they could be detained for three months, then six months. By '67, any person suspected of subversive activities could be detained indefinitely. Torture was routine in prison, people disappeared from their homes, and the South African media was little more than a puppet of the government. All this, Robi heard in whispers on breaks between sets and over drinks with friends, but, for her, the conflict was still arm's length away. She didn't yet know what it would feel like to live inside the heart of a conflict.

It was the 4th of June 1967. Robi was becoming increasingly uneasy as the situation in South Africa worsened. She sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee with generous amounts of milk and sugar, and read the paper, cigarette in hand. Still groggy and hoarse from singing from the night before, she looked out the window. The sun was diluted, hanging low on the horizon, only just beginning to melt the frost deposited on trees the night before. Its warmth touched the edges of the leaves, and slowly moved inward, thawing. Before noon, the frost would be gone.

Robi picked up *The Daily Mail* and read the headline: "War in Israel could be hours away". She had heard that Jews in Israel were digging mass graves out of fear for what might happen if the surrounding Arab nations attacked. What would it be like to feel that kind of fear? To dig your own grave as a response to a threat? It wasn't the fact that she was Jewish that pulled her toward Israel as much as it was an instinct to rush in to stop another's pain.

Dressed in loose-fitting bohemian clothes, Robi arrived at the South African Zionist Federation to volunteer to work on an Israeli kibbutz, aware that she stood out in contrast to the polished Jewish princesses whose clothes were fitted and pressed. It was a sort of mask she wore, the being different. She knows that now. It was her armor — the crazy clothes, the unfiltered comments. Her insecurities are easy for her to see now. But then, she thought she was impenetrable.

"So Miss Damelin, you would like to volunteer for a kibbutz on behalf of the Zionist movement?" the man asked her, the desk between them creating a barrier that Robi welcomed.

"Yes," she answered, not able to cover her contempt for procedure.

The man with the clipboard, behind the big desk, did not seem impressed.

Instead of being accepted, Robi was sent to a psychologist for evaluation to determine her suitability for the cause. The psychologist laughed — that's what Robi remembers of their meeting — and soon after, she was approved to go to Israel. By the time she arrived, the Six-Day War, which started two days after she had made her decision to leave, was over.

When Robi arrived at the kibbutz, she felt a kind of joyful energy surrounding the place, emanating off the people there — the euphoria of winning the war. She was also struck by the

beauty of the place — a pure contrast to Be'er Sheva's inland dust and barrenness. Set on the turquoise shores of the Mediterranean, between Tel Aviv and Haifa, the kibbutz was made up of simple and well-ordered structures. On her first day there, as Robi breathed the salt-tinged air and let the water wash over her feet, soaking the hem of her dress, she was overwhelmed by the feeling that she had made the right decision.

*I will never return to that place, she thought of South Africa. It's hopeless, and people there will never be free.*

## The Day of Atonement

1973

It was still and peaceful — no radio, no television. Even the streets were silent, empty of cars. With the noise of Tel Aviv temporarily muted, Robi could hear the birds singing. She could hear the leaves whispering in the October breeze. It was Yom Kippur 1973. Robi was setting the table for her family's dinner. Though she didn't observe the traditional fasting that is a part of the Day of Atonement or any of the day's religious observances, she enjoyed the silence. Later, after David died, she would begin the practice of making amends on that day. Only then would she call people she had offended during the year, take responsibility for whatever she had done to harm them. It wasn't until after David died that she began to understand that to have reconciliation you must be willing to put your ego aside and tell the truth about your actions.

A lot had changed for Robi since her days on the kibbutz, those first days of making Israel her home. Days she had spent working beside her friend Tessa feeding the chickens, washing dishes in the dining hall, segmenting fruit at the canning factory. At night, she arranged parties for her fellow kibbutzniks and on weekends swam on that incredible beach, her blue work shirt over her swimming suit to cover her size. Since then, she had moved to Tel Aviv, married a widower with two children, had her first child Eran a year later, and David the year after that. Eran was now 1 ½ and David was 4 months old. She had been unprepared for the intensity of love she felt when her children were born, though she had gaped at how odd-looking each of them was. When Eran was born he was jaundiced; his yellow skin and eyes made him look frail. And David had looked like a worm, with his long skinny body and large head with enormous eyes, already curious. Now, with dark hair, round cheeks and unguarded smiles, her boys were beautiful, and just looking at them was the happiest thing in her life.

"Come and sit. Dinner's ready." Robi called the other two children to the table. Her husband Elli was standing over the stove, finishing frying the last piece of fish for the midday meal. She was irritated with him, as usual, but at least he was helping with dinner.

Eran was already there, in his high chair, pounding chubby fists on his tray. Robi held David in one arm and a basket of bread in the other. As she placed the bread on the table, the older children filed in and Elli placed the last piece of fish on a platter. Her marriage was hardly perfect. In ten years, she would be divorced, her stepchildren off to college, and she would finish raising Eran and David by herself. But for now, they were a family, flawed as it was.

"Did you hear that?" Robi asked. It wasn't even two in the afternoon yet but it sounded as if cars were driving by on the street outside their house. There should have been no cars running on Yom Kippur. She had heard rumors that Egypt was preparing for war along the Suez Canal but no one had believed it. After Israel's swift victory in '67, it seemed the country was invincible.

Elli flipped on the radio. Despite her desire to know what was happening, Robi hoped she would hear nothing but static.

“... Egypt and Syria have launched a war against Israel,” the announcer said, and Robi could see her fear reflected in Elli’s eyes.

“What is it?” Elli’s daughter Isabel asked.

It all seemed to happen at once. David crying. Isabel screaming. Sirens wailing.

“Go! Go! Go!” Did Robi yell it or did her husband?

Each of them with a baby in their arms, the older children at their sides, they ran from their home, the piercing, undulating screech of the sirens around them, inside them.

Inside their neighbor’s bomb shelter, protected by concrete and comforted by the presence of other families who had also run to the general’s home, Robi rocked David, who continued to cry. She settled the other children on one of the couches in the small box of a room. Jugs of water stood like rows of soldiers on shelving against the walls. A battery operated radio sat on the table in the center of the room.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“There’s been an attack on the Egyptian border,” the general said.

“And?” Robi said.

“Don’t worry. It’s probably not serious.” The general looked around the room, as if he were taking roll call. “If the IDF takes your husband, then we’ll have something to be worried about.”

He chuckled, an effort at reassurance, she supposed. But Robi knew he was right. Her husband was almost 50. It was unlikely they would call him up at his age. She relaxed a little as time passed and no bombs fell. Within the hour the all-clear siren sounded. Robi and her family returned to their home, their dinner, now cold, still on the table. She warmed it up, fed the children and sent them to bed, but she could not make herself eat. Not an hour and a half later, Elli was called up.

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While folding diapers, nursing David, making meals and breaking up arguments between the older children, always Robi kept the television or radio on, devouring any news about the war.

“The Egyptians have crossed the canal and our forces in Sinai have been hit hard.” The news anchor’s voice was steady but draped with gravity. “The Syrians have pushed deep into the Golan Heights. Grave losses have been incurred on both fronts.”

She heard that Israeli citizens could support the troops by knitting scarves and socks, and so she began to knit. She knit long, uneven, woolen scarves during the day. At night, blackouts were implemented. She put the children to bed early and sat in the dark until she knew she would be tired enough to try for sleep. Every day she learned more of her friends had died. So many of her friends



from the kibbutz, now dead. Neighbors and friends from Tel Aviv, gone. At the end of October, the war was over and Elli returned home.

The war lasted less than three weeks and killed almost 3,000 Israeli soldiers. How many Egyptian and Syrian soldiers had died was unclear. Some estimates were 8,000. Some were as high as 18,000. *This is insane*, she thought. *Look how many people died in less than three weeks.*

If she were going to talk about it now, she would also talk about the families. The ones who loved the ones who died. Every moment of every day, they live with the presence of the void. And what had it accomplished?

## Of Grief and Freedom

2002

At first there was numbness. The ghastly khaki green army truck pulled up in front of her home, the coffin exposed in the back, two soldiers on either side. Robi felt like vomiting, seeing the box that held her boy. Friends ushered her into their car and they followed the truck to the cemetery, where people said gorgeous things about her boy. He was a leader. His students admired him. He stood up for what he thought was right. *Yes*, she thought, *he was all of that, and more*. She didn't know that she could have refused a military burial. Had she known, she would have said no. But she did not know, and had not even thought to ask, so David was honored in military style. He was put to rest as a hero of his country. But to Robi it was bullshit. David had died serving at a checkpoint that was completely useless — a political checkpoint that would be removed the very next day.

She sat Shiva for seven days after he died. People filled her home, bringing pastries and foods and communal mourning that both comforted and smothered her. She hid on the stairs that led to the second floor and put her head in her hands. How could her boy be dead?

Later, she went back to work at her public relations office, though it was as if her body moved and then what was inside her followed along in a fog. She sat at her computer, playing solitaire, as the staff kept the business moving. She returned home at the end of the day, put on Glenn Gould's "Goldberg Variations" and drank whiskey, with her cat purring on top of her chest, absorbing her grief.

There is no way to understand it, this pain. This thing that twists and pulses and builds with nowhere to go. There is no place to direct it. How can it be described? It is a bomb that explodes inside you — not once, but over and over again. What can you do with it?

Some days, Robi put on opera full volume so her neighbors would not hear the animal-like sounds that came from inside her. And she doubled over and wailed, rocking her body as if she were rocking David, while the music of "Madame Butterfly" filled the room.

Robi saw a psychologist, who let her talk about David, about what a waste it was, what a loss. "He was a peace activist, did I tell you that?" Robi would say. "And he had his master's in the philosophy of education. His students loved him. He loved his students."

She listened mostly, the therapist.

"You're free now," she said once.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Robi said.

"I mean that you won't have any fear," she said. "After this kind of loss."

Robi didn't know what she meant but the words took root in the back of her mind.

Repeatedly she was interviewed by the press, for newspaper, radio, television. She said yes to it all. In June, three months after David was killed, she accepted an invitation to speak at a demonstration at the square in Tel Aviv. She had never addressed so many people. The morning of the demonstration she wrote her speech, in English, and had a friend translate it for her. She could have written it in Hebrew, she supposed, but it would have been bad Hebrew. She smiled, thinking of Eran and David as boys, turning red and hiding behind their desks at school if she had to talk in Hebrew in front of their classes. Or if she sent a note to school in Hebrew, they would send it back to her, corrected. *Bloody shits they were*, she thought, and laughed.

The demonstration began at 7 p.m. She was scheduled to speak at 8. She waited her turn, Eran beside her. *How is it that I'm about to talk to 60,000 people?* she wondered. It was surreal, being here, doing this. But Robi felt certain that nothing else was as important as speaking up about what happened to David, what was happening to families every day because of the conflict. When she was introduced, she hesitated for a moment.

“Go up. You'll do it for David,” Eran said.

She walked up the steps to the balcony from which she would speak. Eran stayed in the wings, carrying his own grief, she knew. And then she stepped into the spotlight.

It was dark below her. All she could see of the throngs gathered there were the signs they carried. The sound was deafening. “Get out of the occupied territories!” “No more checkpoints!” “The only solution is a two-state solution!” So many people shouting at once. Robi stood there for several minutes and waited for them to become quiet.

“We cannot do this alone,” she began as soon as the crowd settled down. “We must work together with the Palestinians if we are going to end the conflict.”

She spoke for five minutes and when she finished, people again began to shout. And at that moment, though she did not know it, she had glimpsed her future. As she stepped back from the lights, she suddenly knew what her therapist had meant when she said she would be free and have no more fear. It was freedom from ego. She didn't care if she was a good speaker, if people liked her or approved of her. She felt for the first time what it was like to be in the center of the conflict and entirely committed to the cause, though she did not yet know what form her commitment would take.

## The Eyes of the Other

2002

She had never heard of the Parents Circle-Families Forum (PCFF), this group of Palestinians and Israelis who all had lost family members — many more than one — to the conflict. The group's founder, Yitzhak Frankenthal, whose son had been kidnapped and killed by Hamas, and Roni Hirshenson, a member who had lost two sons to the conflict, came to her home shortly after she'd spoken at the rally. After they had settled and told her a bit about their work, they came to the point.

“We've come to ask you to help us with PR for the Parents Circle,” Yitzhak said. “We bring together families who have every right to hate. We create connections ... but we aren't so good at letting people know about us.”

“If I haven't heard about you until now, then it's obvious you need some PR. Of course I'll help.” She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray before her.

“Wonderful,” Yitzhak said. “We are having a meeting this weekend. You will come?”

Robi arrived to the meeting the following Friday, curious but removed. More than 100 Palestinian and Israeli men and women already filled the room at the Ambassador Hotel in East Jerusalem. Robi took a seat toward the back and listened to the speaker, though she doesn't remember who it was or what he said. What she does remember are the eyes of the Palestinian women. She saw her own pain reflected there.

They broke into small groups made up of a mix of Israelis and Palestinians.

“Who will start?” one of the men asked. “Yona?”

“My name is Yona,” said an Israeli man seated across from Robi. He looked like he was in his 70s, and next to him sat a Palestinian woman who wore traditional Muslim dress, her head covered with a scarf.

“My son was killed while on duty for the IDF,” he said. “It was several years ago, but still ...”

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his eyes. At first a few tears and then more. He couldn't speak. The group waited for him. Robi thought about David and retrieved her own Kleenex, struggling for composure.

“I am glad I am an old man,” he said. “Each year is one year closer to not having to live with this pain anymore.”

The woman next to him put a hand on his shoulder and, for a while, the group sat in silence. At the end of the first day Robi returned to her room at the hotel and wept. Here were people who understood, and it broke her heart.

## A Reason to Get Out of Bed

2003

One year had passed since David's death, nine months since Robi's first meeting at the Parents Circle. She hadn't missed a meeting since. It was the one place, besides her home, where she didn't have to push down the pain and go through the motions. It was a place where her pain was not something to be covered up. The more time she spent with bereaved Palestinians and Israelis, the more she was convinced that their shared pain was a bridge. There were so many elements that caused each side to misunderstand and fear the other — their religious practices, their own view of history, the way the casualties incited each of them to keep the cycle of violence alive. Had the sniper known David, Robi felt sure he wouldn't have been able to kill him. Had he known that David opposed the occupation, she didn't think he could have pulled the trigger of the carbine rifle that he aimed at an Israeli uniform. To the sniper, David and the others he killed that night were not individuals — they were symbols. Of that she was sure.

It was Friday morning and Robi woke early, as she usually did. She turned on the radio to listen to the BBC while she made coffee and mixed dishes of food for more than a dozen feral cats that came to the wall outside her flat each morning for breakfast. As the coffee brewed, she went to retrieve the papers that lay stacked by the front door — *Yedioth Ahronoth*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *The New York Times*, *Haaretz* and more. She no longer rushed to get the papers before making coffee like she did before. Like every other public relations professional she knew, she had loved getting her clients' publicity and the adrenaline rush that came with doing the job well. Before the sun came up, she would lie in bed listening to the birds singing outside the open window, waiting for the sound of the day's papers hitting her door. She would grab her robe and practically run to retrieve them, to see where the press had placed her clients' stories for the week. How much coverage did they get? Were the stories buried in the back pages or did they get front page real estate? If it was a Friday, like today, would the stories be covered in the coveted weekly supplement?

This Friday, one of her clients was indeed slotted for the supplement. It was a five-page article that Robi had arranged to be in *Yedioth Ahronoth* — the most important newspaper in Israel. She brought the papers in, poured herself a cup of coffee, lit a cigarette and sat at the dining room table, readying herself to scan for the article. From where she sat she could see the family pictures hanging in the hallway. Pictures of David and Eran as boys, Eran with his wife Lilah, David with his girlfriend Karney. *David*. What a waste. And for what? The grief surfaced again — as it did daily, hourly, at unexpected moments — and the papers that had once held such importance for her sat in front of her, unread. She did not care to read the coverage she'd maneuvered for her client. She couldn't be bothered. So few things mattered anymore, and in that moment, she knew. It was time for her to work with the Parents Circle full time. Two days later, she announced to her staff that she was closing the office.

Relieved to have focus, Robi threw herself into her new work. All her creative energy and vision, her impossible crazy ideas, she now directed toward the Parents Circle mission — to create

with other bereaved parents a framework for a reconciliation process that could make a future peace agreement possible — something that would prevent more families from experiencing this kind of loss.

Her first big project was a benefit concert in New York City. Yitzhak connected her with someone who knew Patti Smith — the godmother of punk rock. As soon as she heard the name she immediately envisioned a packed auditorium, Patti Smith in the spotlight, throngs of people in the audience. The scale of the event — and its distance from Israel and Palestine — may have seemed daunting to some, but to Robi the challenge was what made her begin to reconnect with life. She made phone calls, arranged a venue, made press contacts — and was energized by all of it. After months of planning, the evening was set, and in April 2004 Robi flew to New York for the event at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. When the evening arrived, she stood off-stage with Nadwa Sarandah, one of her Palestinian friends from the Parents Circle, and watched thousands of people enter the massive and extraordinary Gothic nave to find their seats, while the opening band warmed up.

One after the other, the bands played — “Shall We Gather at the River” by Anonymous 4, “Triumph” by Paul Winter, “Metal Heart” by Chan Marshall. Nadwa spoke, and then Robi. Each of them told their stories of loss. When Patti took the stage the crowd cheered. She stepped close to the microphone and there was silence. The keyboard played the first lingering notes, longingly; then the drums joined, softly; then guitar, one note repeated. Patti began to sing.

“Yesterday I saw you standing there with your hand against the pane, looking out the window at the rain. And I wanted to tell you that your tears were not in vain. But I guess we both knew we’d never be the same. Never be the same,” she sang, her mouth close to the mike, eyes closed.

It felt like she was singing what was in Robi’s heart. An image of David flashed in her memory. He was 18 and was wearing only his underpants, standing in front of the cupboard in his room, his French horn in one hand and sheet music in the other.

*“What in the devil are you doing?” she had asked.*

*“Gonna practice, Mum,” he said. “The neighbors don’t like the noise and it’s hot as hell in there.” He smiled and walked into the cupboard, closed the door behind him and began to play.*

“Why must we hide all these feelings inside? Lions and lambs shall abide. Maybe one day we’ll be strong enough to build it back again. Build the peaceable kingdom back again,” Patti continued.

Robi felt like it was possible, to build a peaceable kingdom, and though she wasn’t alone, there were plenty who didn’t agree. The conflict had been going on for so long and its roots ran deep. Both sides had done terrible things that cannot be forgotten. She let the sound of the music be a vehicle for some of her grief and buoy her determination to do this work. As she looked around at all the people, she imagined what the Parents Circle could do with the money that had been raised

that night. And then, for a moment, she stopped the constant parade of thought through her mind. She let the music occupy the space instead.

**Do I Really Mean What I Say?**

2004

Some of the money that was earned at the concert went toward starting a summer camp for Israeli and Palestinian youth. Robi was on the committee and it was decided that the first camp should take place in Neve Shalom, a village jointly founded long ago by Israelis and Palestinian-Israeli Arabs. Neve Shalom, a place where Palestinian and Israeli families lived together without violence. Neve Shalom, the Oasis of Peace. *People don't talk about those places in Israel*, Robi thought. *The news doesn't cover what's happening in villages like that.*

Robi doesn't remember how many kids came to that first camp, only how important it was to the Palestinian kids to be near a body of water. There was a pool at Neve Shalom, but even better were the camps that later took place at Kibbutzim — on Lake Tiberius. *What would it be like to live 15 kilometers from the sea and not have access to it?* Robi wondered. *What would it be like to live in the West Bank?*

At first the kids glared at each other, unwilling to use the interpreters that were provided so they could communicate. And then slowly, they would soften. First, it was something little — they would make coffee together, or laugh with each other. Then they were talking through the interpreters and soon they would bypass them using words they picked up from each other. Before camp was over they didn't want to go home — because they had discovered what they had in common, and that they were friends.

David would have loved the summer camp. He would have joked with the kids, made them coffee and talked with them about how they could make a difference in the world. Before he started his reserves, he taught students at a kibbutz in the Golan Heights, as they prepared to go into the army. David taught them philosophy, and when he wasn't teaching he was doing his own studies at Tel Aviv University. After he died, Yulie Tamir, his professor, came to Robi's home.

“Do you know that David came to see me for an appointment once?” Yulie had said. Robi loved it when people told her stories about David.

“He was late,” she continued. “And I told him, ‘You know, David. You can't just come late.’ And he said to me, ‘I'm sorry. I came by bicycle.’ ‘It makes no difference,’ I told him. And he said, ‘Yes, but I came from the *Golan Heights* by bicycle.’”

Robi laughed. It took two and a half hours to drive from the Golan Heights to Tel Aviv, with its winding, hilly roads. And David had biked it.

“I remember that day,” Robi said. “He phoned me partway and said he was having tea with some old ladies in Afula. That was David.”

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Months after the first summer camp, Robi was in her kitchen, talking to her Palestinian friend Ali Abu Awaad on the phone. It was an October afternoon and they were making plans to go the following week to an Israeli classroom of 17-year-olds, so they could tell their stories — Robi's story of David being killed by a Palestinian sniper at a checkpoint and Ali's story of being shot by a settler and his brother Yussef being killed by an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint. It was important to talk to the students soon, before they went into the army the following year. *They're just kids*, Robi thought. *What the hell do they know about what they're about to be forced into?* As soon as she had hung up the phone, it rang again.

"Ms. Damelin?" a man said.

"Yes," she answered.

The man said he was from the army and that he'd like to come over to talk to her.

"Of course," she said, hung up the phone and lit a cigarette, her hand shaking. *If it is the army*, she thought, *it is not good news*.

Eran was there as he often was since David had died. It was one of the few things that comforted her, having him around. She felt how much they needed each other. Robi had lost a son. Eran had lost a brother. But in some ways, he had also lost his mother. The more she stepped into the spotlight to talk about the insanity of common loss of Palestinians and Israelis, the harder it was for them to reach each other in the everyday moments.

"It was the army," she said. "They want to come over."

Within the hour two soldiers arrived at her door and she opened it, unable to speak.

"Ms. Damelin?" one said.

Robi stared at the soldiers, her heart accelerating. The déjà vu momentarily immobilized her.

"May we come in?" he asked.

"Please," she said and stood aside to let them in.

"Have a seat," she said, indicating the sofa, but she did not offer them anything to drink. She would have, normally.

She sat across from them and Eran stood beside her chair. The two waited for them to say what they had to say, and one handed her a file. Before she had a chance to open it the soldier spoke.

"We are pleased to inform you that we've arrested the man who killed David and the other nine people," he said. "Take a look." He pointed to the file that she now held, the look on his face satisfied, pleased.

Robi opened it but the words on the pages in her lap were a blur.

“His name is Thaer Hamad.” The soldiers beamed. “From Silwad.”

“I want to meet him,” Robi blurted. She had never thought about what she would do if he was caught. She didn’t expect he would be caught. But there it was — she wanted to meet him.

She was sure the officers expected her to be happy to learn that the man who had killed David would be brought to justice, but she was not. At that moment she only wanted them to leave so she could think.

“Eran?” she said, after she’d closed the door behind the officers. “What do you think?” She moved from the door to one room and then another, not waiting for him to answer.

She picked up the phone to call Ali and hung it up before dialing. As if she was again trying to outrun her future by keeping in motion.

*All this I’ve been saying about seeing the humanity in the other — Palestinian families, Israeli families — that we share the same pain, she thought. All this about building bridges and talking to each other. I said I wanted to meet him, but do I really? Could I really look at the man who killed David and not want to make him suffer?*

*Do I really mean what I say?*

## The Beginning of the End of Conflict

2005

It had been almost three months since the sniper had been caught and charged with 11 life sentences. And Robi hadn't slept well since. When people asked her how she managed the sleepless nights, she joked that she read biographies on Wagner and it would knock her right out, but it wasn't true. Making jokes was her armor, as it always had been.

Though her initial reaction was to say she wanted to meet Thaer, now that she had time to think about it she didn't know if that was really true. She felt like her commitment to peace and reconciliation was being tested, and if she didn't respond by stepping toward the man who killed her son, it would mean she didn't really believe what she'd been saying. She knew it wasn't that she wanted to tell him she forgave him. Not at all. She didn't even know herself what forgiveness meant. Did it mean she didn't think he should be held responsible for David's death? Did it mean she wanted him to be free? No.

But what *did* she want from him? What did she owe herself? And what did she owe David? Those were the questions that shared her bed, driving sleep away as nights crept slowly toward mornings. She talked to Ali about it, more than once. "Write him a letter," he advised.

"I might," she said. "I just might."

As Robi walked into the next PCFF meeting, she pushed the question of what to do about the sniper to the back of her mind. One thing she'd learned since joining the group was that being present — without distraction — was critical. It wasn't possible to connect to another person's pain if you were only partly listening. And so she told her story, and listened to others, and didn't think about what her next step should be. After the meeting a woman came up to her. The woman was Ronit Avni from Just Vision, a peace organization in Washington, D.C., and Jerusalem that promotes joint efforts of Palestinians and Israelis.

"I'm interested in making a film about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict," the woman said. "I think you could help." The woman told her she had done more than two years of research on the conflict and had ideas about what could be done to help move toward peace.

"Of course," Robi said, and the two went to a private room to talk.

"What I found from the research I've done is that visibility is important to advancing peace," Ronit said. "I'd like you and some other PCFF members to be a part of a film about how this violence has affected families."

Robi said yes — the answer she always gave to someone who wanted to tell David's story, and how it represented the stories of both Palestinians and Israelis. And so Ronit's crew began to follow her, filming.

It's hard for Robi to remember the dates or the order things happened. Grief shrouded her brain in fog. Exactly how much later she doesn't know, but she remembers watching a movie on one of the long nights in her flat, as her grief kept sleep at bay. She put "Long Night's Journey into Day" into her VCR and watched and wept. She wondered, after so many atrocities — could there be forgiveness? Would it matter to Israel and Palestine if she wrote a letter to the sniper or not? What was her part in moving toward peace? She spent the next three days in bed, letting her pain and hope lay the groundwork for her next steps.

Soon after, Robi made an appointment to meet with Dan Ba-Ron, a professor at Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva who was known for his criticism of the Israeli occupation and for his work with the second generation of Holocaust survivors and the children of Nazis. She didn't know him but he agreed to meet her, to talk about her desire to connect with the sniper.

"Can we film it?" Ronit asked. "Your meeting?"

"It's private," Robi said. It was one of the few times she didn't invite anyone who was interested, didn't grant the right to walk alongside her in her grief. Maybe she would in time, but as she struggled with what to do, in this moment, she was too raw. She asked Roni — the first person she'd met from the PCFF, the man who had come to her home to ask her to work for them, the man who had become her dear friend — to accompany her. Roni drove her to the meeting.

"Well," Dan said after listening to her. He seemed untouched by the level of anguish the dilemma caused in her. "If you think you can do this, I guess you could," he said. "But you'll have to be patient, and he may not respond for 10 years — if he responds at all."

She left in tears. How dare he be so cavalier? Later, she would think his response might have been empathetic, though not sympathetic. Perhaps there was something in him that supported her efforts, but at the moment his reaction felt cold. She was furious at what felt like a lack of support. But whatever his intent, the meeting gave her what she needed. As she walked out of his office she realized that she had known what she would do before she met with him. She knew that she was going to write to Thae's parents in hopes that they would give the letter to him.

Was it the next morning or several mornings later? It doesn't matter. It was not long after that Robi sat at her dining room table and wrote, the early morning sun streaming in the window.

*This for me is one of the most difficult letters I will ever have to write. My name is Robi Damelin, I am the mother of David who was killed by your son. I know he did not kill David because he was David. If he had known him he could never have done such a thing.*

*David was 28 years old, he was a student at Tel Aviv University doing his master's in the philosophy of education, and he was part of the peace movement and did not want to serve in the occupied territories. He had a compassion for all people and understood the suffering of the Palestinians — he treated all around him with dignity. David was part of the movement of the officers who did not want to serve in the occupied territories but nevertheless for many reasons he went to serve when he was called to the reserves. What makes our children do what they do? They do not understand*

*the pain they are causing, your son by now having to be in jail for many years and mine who I will never be able to hold and see again or see him married, or have a grandchild from him. I cannot describe to you the pain I feel since his death and the pain of his brother and girlfriend, and of all who knew and loved him.*

*All my life I have spent working for causes of co-existence, both in South Africa and here. After David was killed I started to look for a way to prevent other families, both Israeli and Palestinian, from suffering this dreadful loss. I was looking for a way to stop the cycle of violence. Nothing for me is more sacred than human life, no revenge or hatred can ever bring my child back. After a year, I closed my office and joined the Parents Circle-Families Forum. We are a group of Israeli and Palestinian families who have all lost an immediate family member in the conflict. We are looking for ways to create a dialogue with a long-term vision of reconciliation.*

*After your son was captured, I spent many sleepless nights thinking about what to do: Should I ignore the whole thing, or will I be true to my integrity and to the work that I am doing and try to find a way for closure and reconciliation? This is not easy for anyone and I am just an ordinary person, not a saint. I have now come to the conclusion that I would like to try to find a way to reconcile. Maybe this is difficult for you to understand or believe, but I know that in my heart it is the only path that I can choose, for if what I say is what I mean it is the only way.*

*I understand that your son is considered a hero by many of the Palestinian people. He is considered to be a freedom fighter, fighting for justice and for an independent viable Palestinian state, but I also feel that if he understood that taking the life of another may not be the way and that if he understood the consequences of his act, he could see that a non-violent solution is the only way for both nations to live together in peace.*

*Our lives as two nations are so intertwined that each of us will have to give up on our dreams for the sake of the future of the children who are our responsibility.*

*I give this letter to people I love and trust to deliver. They will tell you of the work we are doing, and perhaps create in your hearts some hope for the future. I do not know what your reaction will be, it is a risk for me, but I believe that you will understand, as it comes from the most honest part of me. I hope that you will show the letter to your son, and that maybe in the future we can meet.*

*Let us put an end to the killing and look for a way through mutual understanding and empathy to live a normal life, free of violence.*

It took her 10 minutes to write the letter. Once she made the decision, it all came tumbling out and she wrote it all without pausing — two and a half pages. She put the pen down, read the letter over, folded it up and placed it in an envelope. Then she called Ali.

“I’ve done it,” she said when he answered. “I’ve written the letter. When can you and Nadwa deliver it?”

## Waiting to Reconcile

2006

After the letter was translated, Ali and Nadwa took it to Thær's parents' home, while Robi waited in the courtyard at the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem to hear what they had to say. Seated at a table, surrounded by mulberry trees, she thought about another time she had been there.

*David was 2, running full-tilt in circles around the stone fountain in the center of the courtyard. His chubby legs pumped in toddler intensity as he raced and raced around the fountain, his body tilted sideways as he fought for speed. Around he ran, once, twice, three times, his laughter and motion fused in a moment of careless freedom. Robi turned her gaze away for a moment, and heard a splash. She turned back and saw him standing in the fountain, his dark hair matted to his head, the surprise of his fall painted on his round face. He was alright, she could see that. But as he stood in the water, the people in the courtyard began to laugh, and tears began to form in David's eyes and Robi could see the embarrassment grow in the boy. He ran to her and she felt his embarrassment as deeply as if it were her own. She knew it was a painful thing when others found enjoyment in your loss.*

"What did they say?" Robi asked as soon as Ali and Nadwa arrived, before they could even sit at the table.

"The mother wasn't there," Nadwa said. She moved to one side, Ali to another, flanking their friend.

"The father?" Robi asked.

Ali nodded. "And his brothers."

"They'll give it to him?" Robi asked.

"They said if they could get both nations to sign on the letter there could be peace," Nadwa said.

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Every day, Robi checked her mail, hoping for a response, but there was none. She continued to work on projects for the PCFF — education, summer camps, meetings with parents and families. Generating funding was a constant challenge, one that Robi met with myriad ideas for events to raise both funds and awareness. In 2007 the PCFF launched "Offering Reconciliation," an art exhibit of 135 large ceramic plates painted by the most famous Israeli and Palestinian artists. Painted hands and doves and flowers in black and white, the ceramic platters were artistic symbols of conflict and peace. The exhibit traveled to the United Nations and a gallery in Soho in Manhattan, the World Bank in Washington, D.C., Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., and Bellevue, Wash. The PCFF sold the collection at an arts fair in Chicago and raised enough money to keep the

education program going. And Robi was there at each stop, talking about David and the lifeline that was the Parents Circle.

But the hope for a response from Thaer traveled with her. One year passed and she discovered from one of the Palestinian members of the Parents Circle that Thaer's parents had not yet delivered the letter to him. "I can take it to him," her friend said. She could get into the prison because she was a lawyer.

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"He said he'll write you," the woman said to Robi when she returned from the meeting in prison. Hope rekindled, Robi again checked her mail, day after day, week after week, month after month.

It was the beginning of 2009 and still Robi had no response from Thaer. She still hoped. As she waited, she worked. She and Ali arrived at an all-girls' school in East Jerusalem to tell their stories, to try to plant seeds of understanding. The two walked into the classroom of more than two dozen 16-year-old girls, sitting in rows behind desks, their round faces wrapped in hijab.

"Do you want to start or should I?" Robi asked Ali.

Ali shrugged his shoulders.

"You go," Robi said.

Ali talked about his loss, a story that was not news to the students in the classroom, she knew. They were quiet as they listened to his story, and, as always, Robi thought about David before she began to speak.

"My son David was killed at a checkpoint near Ramallah," she said. "David spent his life working for peace. He studied the philosophy of education and his students ..."

A girl near the back of the classroom stood up before Robi finished her sentence.

"I'm glad," the girl said, pointing her finger. Her voice was shrill and her body shook. "Your son deserved to die."

Robi felt as if she had been hit by a sniper's bullet. She wanted to run. Her body flushed with heat. It happened in slow motion, the feeling that the girl had thrust her hand into an open wound, the impulse to run, the thoughts of David grappling with his duties as an officer and his desire for peace, all colliding with her own desire to make a difference.

And then Robi took a breath, looked in the girl's eyes, and saw her pain. *Of course*, Robi thought.

“Who did you lose?” Robi asked, her voice gentle and full of her own vulnerability. She was brave, this girl, to stand up in a classroom and speak out to someone much older. She had probably never met an Israeli who wasn’t in uniform or a settler. Robi felt sure it was her first time meeting an ordinary Israeli mother.

The girl told her story. It was a cousin who had died, and the girl’s mother and aunt were crazy with grief. Her father and brothers vowed vengeance. At first the girl’s words were angry, accusatory.

“And your mother, your aunt, what color were their tears?” Robi asked.

The girl softened. Her anger seemed to take a back seat to sadness. After, she hugged Robi.

“I’m sorry,” the girl said. Of all the courage it took for the girl to stand up in class and challenge her, Robi knew, to say those words took more.



## One Day

2009

It was late and, as usual, Robi couldn't sleep. She checked her email more out of habit than anything else. It was after 11:00 and she didn't expect to find any new email, but one was there — an email from Ronit, subject line: Letter from Thaer. Robi had waited years for this, but now she hesitated. She read the subject line over and over before opening the email. As long as she could hold off reading it, the response could be anything. She lasted about 60 seconds. When she opened it, she found that the email didn't contain a response, but rather information about Thaer's response. His letter had been published by *Ma'an*, the largest independent television, radio and online media group in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"Perhaps you don't want to know what he says," Ronit wrote. "The Palestinians in the Parents Circle think maybe it would be better if you didn't." At the end, Ronit had included the link to the letter.

Robi took her friend's advice, turned off her computer and tried to sleep. She couldn't read Arabic and so thought it best to wait — and she knew any number of her Palestinian friends would translate the letter for her in the morning. But every time she closed her eyes, the subject line flashed neon-like in front of her — Letter from Thaer. At 4 in the morning, she got up, clicked on the link, and copied and pasted the contents into Google Translate. She knew it was a bad idea, translation-wise, but she couldn't wait any longer.

Much of it didn't make sense in those early morning hours and while she knew the translation was far from perfect, the meaning came through. *Refuses to recognize ... the rights of our people ... sarcastic style ... emotional words ... torture of my people ... stay away ... you're crazy.* She got the gist. Thaer was defending his actions. Intellectually, she wasn't surprised at his response. But how did she feel? She felt nothing. A neutral, numb sort of nothing.

As soon as daylight came, Robi called Eran, expecting him to say something like "For god's sake, Mom. Let this go."

"Mom," he said instead, "don't you realize that this is the beginning of a dialogue?"

The sound of his voice and the impact of his words allowed her mind to stop spinning. He was right, she knew. Robi felt a rush of love for Eran and pride that he could say those words, and her uncertainty about how to respond evaporated. Robi realized with new clarity that her life was not contingent on what Thaer did or did not do. She would not let herself be Thaer's victim. She would not let him hold her heart hostage. She realized in that moment she was free — and would continue to do the work that was so important regardless of Thaer. Robi hung up the phone and prepared the cats' food, the radio on, a weight lifted.

“Alongside Jo Berry, whose father was one of five killed in the 1984 blast, Patrick Magee, the IRA terrorist who planted the Brighton bomb to kill Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, has been invited to the Houses of Parliament to talk about *forgiveness*,” the radio announcer said.

Robi knew Jo Berry. She had met her in New York when the women both spoke at a 9/11 anniversary. The timing of the radio report was, for Robi, a moment of decision. Jo Berry was going to the House of Commons with the man who tried to kill the prime minister — and in the process killed her father. As she listened, Robi knew — she would write a second letter and address Thaer directly.

*Thaer, she wrote, you wrote that David went to the army in order to kill, but this young man, who spent most of his time attempting to effect a change through education, said: “If I go to reserve duty I will treat everyone with respect and so will my soldiers.” I think that these are not the words of a violent person. I think that these are the words of a person who is certain that we should not be in the occupied territories. A Palestinian I met after you killed David told me that he spoke with my son the day before and that he was sorry to hear that David had been killed. This is the human side of the conflict. You say that you killed 10 soldiers and civilians with the goal of ending the conflict. Is it possible that there was an element of personal revenge, as you had seen your uncle violently killed by Israeli soldiers as a child and had lost another uncle in the second intifada? Do you think you changed anything? I think that the killing of human beings, on both sides, only contributes to the cycle of violence.*

She did not try to have the letter delivered to Thaer in prison, but instead let the newspapers pick it up. Robi couldn’t be sure he’d seen it, but it was there if he wanted to read it.

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Although it was important for Robi to write that second letter, she did not expect an answer. She didn’t even know if he’d read it. She still wanted to meet him, face to face, and challenge him to admit that his acts were born more of revenge than fighting for a cause. She wanted to have some sense of closure. She wanted it, but she did not need it. She no longer felt like Thaer’s victim.

Shortly after, she received an email from Erez Laufer and Miri Laufer — a brother and sister film team, asking her if they could talk to her about South Africa for a film they were working on.

“We’re hoping for some contacts,” Miri told her when they met. “We want to explore the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how it affected the people who did the killing and those whose loved ones disappeared and were killed.”

At the time they told Robi they were thinking of casting actors in the movie, instead of filming the story as a documentary, but they changed their minds after talking to her. They asked her if they could frame the film around her story. Robi said what she always said: Yes.

The film would require Robi to return to South Africa. She had been there only once since she left in 1967 and vowed not to come back. In 2008 she went for a conference with Ali, and while they were there, visited an elementary school in one of the poorer areas near Johannesburg. As they

entered the classroom, Robi was unprepared for the impact. Though there was still poverty, there had been progress. Students sat at computers, their brown chubby hands on the keyboards. She thought of Charlie, unable to read until his 40s, Charlie who had worked so hard to provide for his family, Charlie sending home his check each month without the chance to see his family.

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Now, in 2009, she was in South Africa again, this time with a film crew to try to understand how the country began the hard work of reconciliation after apartheid was abolished. After so much loss of life and deep-rooted prejudice, Robi wondered how they had been able to begin the work of peace.

Being there opened old wounds for Robi as she talked to Adriaan Vlok, the minister of law and order in South Africa in the final days of apartheid — one of its most notorious leaders. The oppression and hopelessness she'd felt came rushing back as she sat opposite the man who was responsible for so many atrocities. But now he had been granted amnesty, and once a month he brought food to some of the mothers of the children he was responsible for killing. How was it possible that after having set in motion such despicable acts, he had turned away from violence and bigotry and embraced the humanity of the people he formerly persecuted?

“It was in 1995, 1996. And I had to decide if I shall apply for amnesty or not,” Adriaan said to Robi. The two sat facing each other, drinking coffee.

“If you hadn't applied for amnesty, would you have been prosecuted?” Robi asked.

“I would have been in jail, prosecuted. Yes,” he said.

Robi didn't know what to make of him. He seemed patronizing, and she wasn't convinced that his motivations were sincere.

“So really you did it because you knew that was the only way you wouldn't go to jail?” Robi asked.

“No...yes. In the beginning that was so,” he said, seeming to struggle with the words.

At least he was honest, she thought. But as he continued to talk, Robi felt challenged by the possibility that someone like this could change. All the work she'd done to free herself from victimhood, to let go of anger at Thaeer, threatened to slip away, and the question — *Do I really mean it?* — presented itself to her again.

Later, during the filming, Robi sat in a room with 10 mothers from the Mamelodi Township near Pretoria. Their sons had disappeared in 1986, and their bodies were never found. Adriaan was responsible for that — these were the atrocities for which he had been granted amnesty. These were the women whose children were dead and missing. Now, every month he delivered food to these women. There were many things about that action that stunned Robi to think about — Adriaan

treating people he had previously devalued with respect and humanity, mothers whose children he had a hand in killing welcoming him into their homes, finding acceptance without forgetting, moving forward toward peace despite the cost. This step toward reconciliation would not bring their children back, but the cycle of violence had been stopped, and the power and sacrifice required from both sides was not lost on Robi.

It was so much like sitting in the Parents Circle, the shared pain, except that these mothers didn't know what had happened to their sons. It was an extra layer of grief, the not knowing. Watching Adriaan interact with the mothers of the boys he had ordered killed was difficult. But it was unfair to judge him, Robi thought. The amnesty was critical to the process of reconciliation. Years later, Robi would see Adriaan and Maria, one of the mothers, at the premier of *One Day After Peace*. They would look so comfortable, like an old married couple almost. Something about the process had worked, she supposed. It gave her hope.

Still, the complexity of how to get to that place of peace was a mystery. At every turn, Robi's interactions raised the question: What is forgiveness?

It was another mother, one whose daughter had been killed during apartheid, who finally gave Robi an answer that made sense to her. The woman's name was Ginn Fourie, and her daughter Lyndi was killed in South Africa in 1993. The man responsible was the director of military operations of the Azanian People's Liberation Army — a man named Letlapa Mphahlele. Though he didn't pull the trigger, he ordered the attack on Heidelberg Tavern, where Lyndi celebrated the New Year with friends. Lyndi was 23 and about to graduate with a degree in civil engineering. Like David, she had felt the weight of injustice and the awareness of privilege and power and often talked to her mother about it. And Ginn, like Robi, was left to wrestle with how to move toward peace after losing a child to violence.

When Robi met Ginn, the two mothers sat in silence for a moment. Robi again felt the familiarity of loss — but also of strength. Ginn, too, knew what it was like to lose a child. Eventually, Robi asked the question she hoped Ginn could answer.

“What is forgiveness?” Robi asked. “For you?”

Thoughtful, and with gentleness, Ginn answered her. “Forgiving is a process in which you take a principled decision to give up your justifiable right to revenge.” There was a quality to her voice that calmed Robi. She knew Ginn did not come to the answer lightly.

*Yes*, Robi thought. *Yes, it makes sense*. After asking priests and imams and rabbis, finally she had an answer that didn't feel pat. *This has some content for me*, Robi thought. *This I can understand*. And she decided that when she returned to Israel, she would see if she could find a way to finally meet Thae face to face.

## To Stay Focused

2010-2014

When Robi returned to Israel, her work awaited her. The “History through the Human Eye” project of PCFF was launching — and it was perhaps the project that gave Robi the most hope. She was sure that making the effort to see history from the viewpoint of “the other” was a key to reconciliation.

The pilot project was long over. It had consisted of 140 members of the Parents Circle — half of them Palestinian and half of them Israeli. They had toured the holocaust museum together, what was left of a Palestinian village that was now occupied by Israel, listened to historical accounts of what it was like in 1948 — for Israelis it was Independence Day, for Palestinians it was *al-Nakba*, the Catastrophe. Pairs of participants visited the graves of their children. Robi learned later what happened for each of the pairs when the group came together. So many people shared stories about how they gained understanding of the other.

There was Nasra, for one. Nasra Shehab’s partner for the project took her to his house, to the gravesite of his two sons who had been in the Israeli army and had been killed. Nasra had also lost two children to the conflict. She began to cry, looking at the tombstone of the man’s sons, their faces imprinted on the stones. She bent down, still crying, and kissed the tombstone. “I wish I could have such a thing for my two sons,” she had said. “It is beautiful.” The two stood together at the grave and cried for each other’s loss.

As each story was told to the group, Robi was more and more convinced that this was a way to move toward reconciliation. Soon after, the PCFF began taking the project to the broader community. It did not make sense to wait until loved ones had died to try to connect to the humanity of the other.

Bassam Aramin had lived his own version of “History through the Human Eye,” Robi thought, even before his 10-year-old daughter Abir was shot and killed by the Israeli army in 2005 and he joined the PCFF.

When Bassam was 17, he and his friends found a cache of old weapons. None of the boys really knew how to use them, Bassam had told her, but they tried. They threw a Molotov cocktail at an Israeli tank. Soldiers chased them and Bassam was caught, arrested and spent seven years in jail. While there he saw *Schindler’s List*. He had been looking forward to it. He wanted to enjoy the suffering of the Jews. But instead he found himself crying, unable to stop his tears, which he wiped away so the other prisoners would not see. The movie changed him. He saw the humanity of the other.

Later, Bassam became Robi’s partner as a spokesperson for the PCFF. The two of them, one Israeli, one Palestinian, traveled all over the world, telling their stories. It was Bassam that Robi asked to mediate for her if she was ever allowed to meet with Thaer.

Though she had set her mind to meet with Thaer while she was in South Africa, Robi felt like there was so much in the way, so much preventing her from meeting him. The police would not grant her access. The Ministry of Justice wasn't helping. It was quite possible he would not agree to see her. But after a couple of weeks back home, she realized that it was she herself who was in the way. All these things, they were excuses. If she really wanted to face him, she would have to act. She went to the minister of justice, who gave her permission to enter the jail.

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Robi is still waiting to meet him. And events that test her commitment keep coming. It is not a once-and-done sort of thing; this commitment is a decision she makes over and over.

In 2014 Robi was accepted into the Women PeaceMakers Program in San Diego, Calif. She didn't know quite what to expect but it was another opportunity to tell David's story and her own — to explore the experiences that shaped her, and to spend some time with other women from around the world who also work for peace in the midst of conflict.

The first day she arrived in San Diego in late September, she received an email. It was from a friend back home, telling her *Eyes of a Thief* had just been released — a feature film about Thaer. In her room in La Casa de la Paz on the University of San Diego's campus that first night, she could not sleep. A cool breeze blew through the open window in her second-floor room. She looked outside, down at the gardens filled with fruit trees, tropical flowers and shrubs. A lone bunny hopped across the path and into the brush, and Robi silently promised to leave lettuce under the shrub for him the next day. This place felt like a refuge, separate from the conflict she was used to, but she was unable to let it seep into her consciousness, so consumed she was with the movie about the man who killed her son. What would the effect of the film be? Would David's death be portrayed as some kind of victory? Would it further stir the violence that had erupted in the summer — when three Israeli teens were kidnapped and killed, and in response a young Palestinian was killed and burned? The 50-day war those events had spurred was over, but the cycle of violence was not.

Robi arrived at the first meeting with the other PeaceMakers, writers and staff, her eyes red from tears and lack of sleep. The overhead fluorescent lights in the conference room stung her eyes and she struggled to stay focused. She never knew when something would challenge her commitment to reconciliation. *Do I really mean it?* she thought again. Yes, of course by now she knew she did. But it was still not easy. She pushed aside the worry of how this might set back her work because what could she do about it at this moment? Nothing. She was here to tell her story, to tell David's story. *Enough*, she told herself, and dismissed any thoughts of what effect the film might have on the conflict.

The challenges would keep coming, this she knew. It was fine. That was the way this whole thing worked. And in those moments, she thought of David, and her work to prevent other families from feeling this same pain. She thought about David when he was alive, with all his humor and

passion and love. She thought about the last time she saw him, days before he died — the way she wanted to remember him.

*It was his day off and he was wearing a red jersey and jeans. Red was a good color for David, against his dark hair. They had been to lunch with her cousin who was visiting from Oxford. It was such an ordinary thing, but lovely. Robi and David took her around to show her Tel Aviv and buy presents for her family. They dropped her at her hotel and afterward David drove Robi home. The mixture of sunlight and shadow dappled the streets as the light shone through the trees. Windows rolled down, they chatted and teased each other, mother and son. David pulled the car to the curb in front of her flat, she got out and turned to say goodbye, not knowing it would be their last.*

*She blew him a kiss, and he smiled and waved — and drove away.*

## A CONVERSATION WITH ROBI DAMELIN

*The following is an edited compilation of interviews conducted by Sigrid Tornquist and an interview during a public event by IPJ Senior Program Officer Jennifer Freeman on October 21, 2014.*

**Q: What was it like growing up in South Africa during apartheid?**

A: It was like living in a bubble almost. I think you can equate a lot of what happens in the world to what happened in South Africa. Many people were not aware of what was happening to the Black South Africans. I came from what you might call an armchair liberal family. My uncle defended Mandela in the first treason trial. I also had an uncle who walked from Pietermaritzburg to Johannesburg with Gandhi when he was first in South Africa. I had a very privileged background and even though I never agreed with apartheid and have always had a bent to fight injustice, I still benefited from the apartheid system.

**Q: In 1967 you chose to leave South Africa and move to Israel. At the time, how did the conflict Israel was engaged in affect your decision? Or did it factor in at all?**

A: I wanted very much to leave South Africa. It was becoming increasingly dangerous. And when I read the headlines in the paper that war in Israel was imminent, I decided to volunteer — to save Israel (kind of a *casus belli* reaction). I came to Israel with about 29 other volunteers and we worked on a kibbutz.

**Q: Your decision to emigrate and have your family in Israel was long before the tragedy that defined your current activism. Could you tell us a little bit about your life as a mother and specifically about David. What was he like?**

A: As you started to ask me the question, I suddenly remembered when Egypt President Anwar Sadat came to Israel.<sup>6</sup> I was sitting with my two little boys next to me watching the news. Sadat came out of the plane and I thought: *My children won't have to go to the army now.*

When the boys were small, we lived on a *moshav* (a little farm). I remember when David was a young boy, he and a friend thought it would be a good idea to build a fire in the storage shed. And for some reason it made sense to them to build the fire in an open suitcase. The fire got out of control and burned the shed down. They were just being normal kids, you know? And it was really kind of funny. When the insurance adjuster came to talk to my husband to document the value of what was inside, Elli listed items that really had no value anymore — like this vacuum cleaner. When Elli mentioned it, David said, “Of course, that vacuum didn’t work anymore.” He was hell of honest.

When the boys were teenagers, I got divorced and lived in Tel Aviv and we were like this triangle: Eran, David and me. We volunteered together at the SPCA grooming animals and for all sorts of causes. Of course the boys also fought with each other — in that way they were just typical kids. Before David was killed he was a student at Tel Aviv University studying for his master’s in the philosophy of education. He was teaching students who were social leaders. He was part of the peace movement and part of the uprising. He went to jail seven times during the student uprising. Then he was called to go to the reserve. You know, you think you know the person behind the gun. You don’t.



**Q: There have been many films featuring you and your work. In *One Day After Peace* you return to South Africa with a documentary film team to see how the country where you were born worked to achieve forgiveness and reconciliation after decades of apartheid. What did you take away from the experience that you can use in your work in Israel?**

A: I think it's very important to note that I didn't go to South Africa because apartheid in South Africa is the same as what is happening in Israel and Palestine. We went to South Africa to see what lessons we could learn from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, bearing very much in mind that Israel and Palestine is not South Africa. It's not the same culture. It's not the same religion. However, we can learn lessons. We can also learn what did not work in South Africa, for instance, how they treated people who had given evidence (the victims) afterwards. In my own context I also wanted to try to understand what forgiving is.

**Q: What do you think worked and didn't work in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?**

A: The question of amnesty is a very big question. You mustn't forget that one thing that happened in South Africa is that they needed to find the bodies of all the children who had been disappeared and lost. In order to find the bodies they offered amnesty. So that part was very important. What also worked was that they broadcast the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings on the radio and television. People who had never been aware of what had been going on, who didn't want to know, suddenly knew. If there had not been a truth and reconciliation process in South Africa, there would have been a blood bath, without any doubt.

**Q: Tell me about some of the programs through the Parents Circle-Families Forum.**

A: We have several ongoing programs.

*On the Road to Reconciliation:* Every year, Israeli and Palestinian PCFF members facilitate classroom dialogues to some 14,000 high school students in both Israel and Palestine. They share their personal stories and guide the participants through a discussion about the conflict and the possibility of reconciliation.

*The Parallel Narrative Project:* This adult education program explores the national and individual narrative of the "other" among Israeli and Palestinian change agents, such as journalists, public figures, social workers, educators and civil society leaders. More than 450 people have participated in the parallel narrative module, which is made up of trust-building sessions, history workshops, visits to significant places in the history of the other, and dialogue with the other. As part of the project, PCFF produced the documentary *Two Sided Story*.

*Crack in the Wall:* The Israeli-Palestinian Facebook community acts to create a "crack" in the proverbial and literal wall by engaging Palestinians and Israelis in dialogue and providing a platform to express themselves in their own language and translate it to the other side. Our Facebook community of more than 22,000 members provides an unprecedented social network for Israelis and Palestinians to connect.

Reconciliation Paper: The PCFF is currently working together with academics from both sides and international experts' input to create a "Reconciliation Paper" to be integrated into any future political peace agreements.

Youth Program: The PCFF runs an annual summer camp that has proven to be an extraordinary experience for both sides in the creation of empathy for the "other."

Women's Group: Within the PCFF there is a very active women's group which aims to strengthen the role of women in conflict resolution. The Women's Group meets regularly, engages in joint cooperative projects and holds large public events to engage others in their projects. The Women's Group incorporates powerful storytelling through a photography exhibit (*Presence of the Void*), as well as culinary and textile arts.

**Q: Can you share a little more about the Parallel Narrative Project and why it's significant to reconciliation?**

A: Currently there are about 600 families in the Parents Circle-Families Forum; slightly more than half are Palestinian and the rest are Israeli. We recognized that we shared the same pain. There is no difference between me and a Palestinian mother, I promise you. I don't know how many Palestinian mothers you've ever met, but I can tell you when we go to bed at night, it's the same pain, the same tears on the same pillows. So we recognized that we shared the same pain, and from that pain came an innate trust — although that didn't mean that we actually agreed with each other's narrative. And we decided that it was important for reconciliation to understand how the other one sees their history.

Our experiences shape the way we view history. The program was first called "History through the Human Eye," and we brought 140 members from our group (70 Palestinians and 70 Israelis) to try to understand each other's perception of history — both individually and nationally. One of the first things we did was to go to the holocaust museum. You cannot take for granted that 70 Palestinians will go to the holocaust museum. It was an extraordinary experience. We didn't go for comparison of suffering. We went to the holocaust museum so they could understand the fear Jewish people carry with them. If you don't understand that, you will never understand what is required security-wise for the Jewish people.

Then we had a lecture by a Palestinian historian and an Israeli historian. Each one gave the milestones of our history — the Balfour Declaration, the White Paper, the '67 war, 1948. What is 1948 for the Palestinians? It is *Al Nakba* — the catastrophe — when they lost their homes. But what is it for Israel? Independence. What came of that was that there was empathy and understanding of how the other sees history.

We also went to a village that used to be Palestinian and is now in Israel proper. Most of the village is destroyed now. And when we got there one of the mothers who had lived in the village when she was young was looking down and she began to cry. I said to her, "What?" And she said, "You see here, this is the well that I used to draw water out of as a child." Seeing that, you begin to understand the longing. And then you can understand with empathy why this woman is walking around with a key around her neck, to a door that will never be opened again.

**Q: How has the program been expanded beyond the members of the Parents Circle-Families Forum?**

A: We've now created the same program for the public with funding from USAID and our academic partners at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. We bring together about 30 people from the general public — half Israeli and half Palestinian — who have some shared way of identifying. One group might be teachers, another doctors, or artists or grannies. They do similar activities to that original project and then toward the end they plan a project to do together. For example, teachers might plan a lesson based on parallel narratives to be used in their classrooms. Artists might plan an exhibit that speaks to varied narratives. We've done about 18 groups so far and are planning more. I think it might be one of our most effective programs.

**Q: How did the Parents Circle-Families Forum react to the Israel-Gaza conflict this past summer [2014]?**

A: After the Israeli kids were kidnapped and killed and then the Palestinian was killed, we knew instinctively that there was going to be another cycle of violence. And of course there was.<sup>7</sup> So the PCFF committee met and decided we needed to go to the public and provide a place where people could actually talk to each other about what was happening. We opened what we call the Peace Square outside Tel Aviv Cinameteque. Several members of the PCFF held a vigil at the tent. Members took turns giving testimonies of their loss and how seeing the humanity in the other is vital to achieving peace.

For 70 days, these circles of dialogue took place between Israelis and Palestinians, and among Israelis on their own at the PCFF's Peace Square in Tel Aviv. So many people came to the square and called us Nazis and shouted at us that we should die and go live in Gaza, but we spoke to them respectfully. You'll never achieve peace if you exclude people from the conversation just because they're angry or view things differently than you do. And when you exclude people who you believe have radical beliefs, they only become more radical.

Also during that time, bereaved Israelis and Palestinians also painted a message of peace together through the creation of the Peace Square Mural. They began painting it in Beit Jallah, the West Bank. Then we took it to Tel Aviv, wrapped it around the tent, and people came and painted the rest of it. The mural is going to be displayed at the United Nations in 2015.

**Q: How do you think the occupation is affecting Israel?**

A: More people are killed on the roads in Israel than in the conflict. There is more domestic violence than there's ever been. There is more violence in schools. You cannot occupy another country for so many years and not expect that it would affect the country's moral fiber. Even if you don't care about the Palestinians — and I care deeply — imagine what the occupation is doing to Israel. Somewhere along the line everybody's got to own up to the mistakes they've made and Israel has to get out of the occupied territories because it is destroying Israel's moral fiber. And that disturbs me terribly because I love Israel — but I want to live in a moral country. You can't imagine how pernicious this occupation is.

**BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER—****Sigrid Tornquist**

Sigrid Tornquist, a freelance writer and editor, believes that putting words to an experience can be a catalyst for change. Most of her varied work experiences have been focused on respecting and elevating the opportunities and rights of people whose value is often not recognized by society at large. She has worked with children with disabilities, senior citizens in a resident setting and in the community, and for an elementary school with a high at-risk student population. Tornquist has a BA in writing from Metro State University and is currently pursuing her MFA in writing from Hamline University, both in St. Paul, Minn. She spent several weeks in Cameroon writing about the Birth Attendant Training Program class offered annually by the Life Abundant Program, which seeks to empower communities to combat the high mortality rates of women and children. Tornquist's column "Perspective," in the magazine *Specialty Fabrics Review*, was awarded Best Regular Column, given by the Minnesota Magazine & Publishers Association, in 2010, 2012 and 2013.

In 2010, she worked as a peace writer with Woman PeaceMaker Sarah Akoru Lochodo of Kenya and Radha Paudel of Nepal in 2012.

**JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE**  
**at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies**

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

<sup>2</sup> Pogrund, Benjamin. *Drawing Fire: Investigating the Accusations of Apartheid in Israel*. Rowman & Littlefield. Lanham, Maryland: 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, Benny. *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London: 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Sari Nusseibeh’s book *Once Upon a Country, A Palestinian Life* was also consulted for the Conflict History. (Picador. New York: 2008.)

<sup>5</sup> Israel Defense Forces

<sup>6</sup> In November 1977, Sadat’s historic visit to the Israeli Knesset broke the Arab policy of not dealing publicly with the Jewish state that was created in 1948.

<sup>7</sup> In the summer of 2014, violence erupted in a 50-day war between Israel and Palestine after three Israeli teens were abducted on their way home from school in the West Bank. A Palestinian teen was abducted shortly thereafter. Gaza launched rocket attacks into southern Israel and Israel carried out airstrikes against Gaza.