

Have You Seen Grandpa Lately?

by Tovit Neizer

Chapter One: Passover Eve, 2019

Families in holiday clothing walked towards their cars. Tel Aviv's side streets sent their stillness into the air, and a single citron tree spread a gentle blossom scent.

"Say, how do you live in this city?" Shmulik's nasal voice startled Yoni from his thoughts about his grandfather. "Geez, I don't get you. What do you see here? All the buildings are old...look! You're probably paying my house mortgage to get the rundown fifty meters I saw."

"Sixty meters," Yoni corrected. "I'm looking for a new place now. They're raising the rent by 2500 shekels. The landlord's grandson plans to ruin the building. To expedite things, he's pushing us all to leave."

"You're looking for a new place again! I don't get what keeps you in this city. Either the buildings are falling apart, or they're getting ruined and replaced by towers."

"Listen, tell Michal to ask Mom for the exact address." Yoni pulled the key out of the motorbike.

"You don't remember where your grandfather lives?" asked Shmulik.

"Just ask."

The adjacent building confused him. Some were renovated: they rose over the years and stretched to the side with their green, lush terraces. The last time he visited the apartment was a few years back when his grandfather had received the Filipina caregiver and his mom asked him to swing by and make sure the two got along.

His grandfather was edgy and detached. The Filipina sat in her room, silent and alert. His mother was away on a long trip, and he didn't want to worry her. With a short call, he assured her that the two were perfectly fine, and that sealed the deal for all sides.

Shmulik's voice woke him from his memory. "Here, he said, "Rashi 43, flat no. 5, no intercom or lock. Well that's great. Later on, you'll wonder where he is and why he's

not answering. Many things can happen in a building where anyone easily enters. Just don't be surprised later on."

Yoni half listened to his brother-in-law while he tried to take off a card stuck to the bottom of his flip flop. A young woman gazed at him with seductive eyes.

"He's not answering my mom, Shmulik. I haven't talked to him for a while. Just the typical 'hi-bye' at holiday dinners."

"No, you realize that we're gonna see a dead body in a second?" Shmulik grabbed his head, surprised each time he realized that his hair was gone.

"We'll use the key, see what we see, and get out," said Yoni in a practical tone as he looked for the key in his jeans' pockets. The metal rattle of the key chain and the single coins in his pocket threatened to shake the building out of its stagnation. His broad shoulders melted and stretched downwards due to the heavy family burden, even before the holiday dinner began.

How's work? What about that promotion? Where do you see yourself in a few years?

His dad had pushed him to study economics as if it was a guarantee for anything. *You can't work in carpentry at age 30, you gotta understand*, he kept saying. In the end, thanks to his friends from reserve duty, he joined an investment house. He arrived each morning, sat in front of the computer, and stared at his reflection on the blank screen before waking them both up.

Twice a year, he was obliged to attend family meals. From the rest he easily got away: his mom let him slide. She didn't have time to pressure him with all her work trips abroad. But on Passover and Rosh Hashanah, she needed everyone to attend.

The brothers-in-law advanced down the street toward the building. The long, wet hair of a girl, holding a motorbike helmet, who passed them on the curve drew Yoni by the nose. Citron-scented shampoo merged with the blossom smell coming from the tree in the yard. He thought of the empty shampoo bottle Sigal had left in his apartment. It had been standing there for three weeks now. Other girls walked in and out of the shower and, still, that bottle stared at him, orphaned.

Yoni followed the girl with his eyes and tried to make eye contact. Shmulik followed him, wondering how many women he had slept with this month.

“You should have visited more often,” he threw at him. The girl climbed on the motorbike and drove away. Yoni kept his eyes on her.

The sidewalk leading to the building was dark. Shmulik stood behind Yoni, lifted his phone, and turned on the flashlight.

“Come on! You’re blinding me with these lights!” Yoni pushed Shmulik’s hand down.

The rusty building door stood in front of him. At its center was a dark glass panel with shaky hinges. They walked up the stairs: Yoni led the way, the apartment key in his hand. A wooden sign with engraved letters of the family name “Levinger” hung on the door.

“Look, this feels bad,” Shmulik almost whispered. “I can smell the decay from here. How long did you wait? The Filipina didn’t answer?”

“I have no clue,” Yoni replied out loud. “Mom was at a convention and then they went on a cruise. She just told me to pick him up for the holiday.”

“Right! So, she and Moti weren’t at home for a month! No one spoke with him all this time? What’s the deal with your fucked up family?!”

“Lower your voice. Most families are fucked up, except for your well organized family. I’m going in. You might want to cover your nose and mouth, just in case.” To his surprise, the key turned easily in the knob.

A rotten smell rose from the apartment. Yoni stood in the hall and searched for his grandfather. Suddenly, a familiar smell replaced the odor and melted the cobwebs off his memory. He heard the flip flops running over the stairs during the summer holidays and saw the neighbors' kids hiding in the hallway. There he was, standing on a tall stool in the kitchen, with the tempting smell of cookies bursting from the oven. He was sitting in the dining room next to the table, while his grandfather solved crosswords. In the planter behind the dark window, a geranium blooms.

On a shelf in the living room, he saw the wooden work he had made as a kid. His grandmother had insisted on exhibiting it. He was thrilled by this gesture. Mom never showed his works and drawings, preferring to stack the shelves with souvenirs from her trips around the world - wooden engraved sculptures and traditional dolls.

His grandfather's heavy coat hung in the corridor. He always hid in it when Michal looked for him. In each pocket he would stash a treat in case it took her a long time to find him. In the meantime, Grandmother sat in her armchair and read.

During her Shiva, visitors came to pay their condolences and sat on her armchair. He saw his grandfather cringe in the corner until one night he moved the armchair to their bedroom and locked the door.

His grandfather's books, lying in different spots in the house, reminded him of the library he had planned on building for him. Yoni stood in the hall and glued faded pieces of their family past together. Shmulik's strong sniff pulled him back to the present, to the visit's aim.

The two walked slowly into the depths of the house. The rotten smell grew stronger. Yoni's flip flops drew him to the bedroom, with Shmulik dragging behind. Yoni shoved the wooden door. An awful smell enveloped them: they covered their noses. Shmulik started to shiver uncontrollably. Yoni covered his mouth and walked toward the bed.

He lifted the blanket slowly and unveiled long dark pajamas, brand new with a buttoned upper part. The pajamas were neatly folded. The closet's door was slightly open, and he could see the orderly shelves. If only he could walk through it to a simpler place, like in the book he loved as a child, without all the drama rising around him.

"There's nothing here," he said and turned to Shmulik, who was kneeling on the floor and fighting his stomach. Before he realized what was happening, Shmulik ran to the toilet and vomited.

Wind entered through the window and blew away a trail of gray feathers piled on a broken shutter. Yoni followed them with his eyes. On the other side of the bed, on the floor, he noticed a few dead doves.

Chapter Two

Rina lifted the tablecloth above the long table. Then she sneaked a look at the expensive watch on her left wrist and glanced at the entrance door, wondering when her dad would enter. Anxiousness overtook her, and she sent a finger to adjust the leather straps of her new high heels. In the summer, when the Filipino and her dad came for her birthday, they looked almost happy. Was she only imagining it? After all, Dad resented her so much when she had brought him the caregiver a few years back.

“But wait! You didn’t tell us how India was!” said Drora, her cousin, wearing what looked like a wide burlap tent, interrupting her thoughts.

“You’re right!” Rina raised her voice trying to drown out the guests’ voices. They were caught up in a conversation in the living room. She moved her palm to her chest, and a wide smile took over her face. The colorful metal bracelets she had bought rattled - cheap jewelry overpaid for as a tourist. When she recalled the day of the purchase, she hid them and repressed the long argument with the shopkeeper in his worn out clothes, an argument that ceased only when Moty had pleaded with her to let it go.

“Magic. Sheer magic. You haven’t seen places like this, not even in fairy tales.” Her eyes lit up. “And I’m not talking about after-the-army India with all that filth,” Drora nodded agreeably. “I’m talking about a magical culture, fascinating, enriching...I learned so much there.”

She recalled one of the yoga classes she had initiated for the delegation members. They were taught to breathe deeply, “flowingly”. She was focusing on those exercises when her phone broke the silence, and the instructor asked her to step outside, accusingly. Evelyn recalled that she needed to answer her many messages and did so with a short apology.

“Sorry. Aba ok. Doctor check say ok,” was all she wrote. Rina hoped that the Filipino would serve as a narrow bridge, connecting her and her dad. He hardly spoke, at least not with her. Soon enough she realized how wrong she was.

“You learn so much from these Asians,” she continued. “They have a different rhythm of life, a different respect for people...and the food! Oh my, the food! It’s just... incredible. The colors, the flavors, everything is so intriguing, everything!” She arranged the plates on the table.

“And you’re planning to bring many Indian tourists here?” asked Drora.

“Look.” Rina stopped arranging the plates and stared straight at Drora. “I have big plans for the ministry of tourism. Every decade they have different plans. A few years back, they said they’ll bring a billion Chinese to Israel. And a billion Chinese can’t be wrong, right?” Drora was about to reply but then stopped.

“No! They can’t!” declared Rina, “and they have arrived! But as foreign labor.”

Drora’s constant nodding synched with the Asian cat statue resting on one of the shelves in front of her. The cat nodded its head and waved a hand. “I’m telling you here and now that the Indians won’t go wrong when they will come to the holy land.”

“Ok,” Drora mumbled and was immediately hushed again.

“I’m showing all the young girls at the office that there’s no age for revolutions. When I was thirty, I built one of the biggest PR firms in Israel. So there you go. They can keep counting the days ‘til my retirement.” Rina glanced again at her watch.

“Say, what’s with your brother? So busy he didn’t return my call about tonight. He’s with Tamar’s family?”

“Yes, Yoel is over his head busy,” Drora replied with pride. “So much pressure, so many investigations...we hardly see him.”

Rina was surprised that her cousin still worked after all that had happened and, even more, had been promoted. It made no sense to her.

“He probably didn’t have time to call me back. I left him a message that he’s invited, of course. No doubt his work takes up all his time now. I totally understand. You know, Drora, to be honest, we never thought he’d make it far in life...and the police out of all places...with all his nonsense when we were kids...but listen, he’s really doing it big!” She was again bothered by the time.

“Are they always late?” she whispered quietly just as the doorbell rang. Outside stood Shoshi, Rina’s childhood neighbor from Tel Aviv, and Yigal, her husband.

Every year the couple took time off from their kids and spent the holiday eve with Rina's family. Shoshi held a bottle of wine in one hand and her husband's arm in the other. He was hugging a big Sansevieria plant wrapped in cellophane, and its red ribbon hid his face.

"Look at you, right on time!" Rina went up to hug her friend. The man hurried to place the heavy plant on the floor and kissed Rina on her cheeks.

"Safta, when are we eating?" asked her granddaughter, who waited patiently with her mother.

"Soon, sweetie, soon."

"What soon? They're not back with Grandpa yet," said Michal.

Rina sent an inquisitive stare at her daughter. She was sitting on the couch between the guests and showed no desire to help.

"So nice that everyone's here," said Shoshi, as Rina counted the missing ones in her head.

"That's enough, I'm hungry," said her husband, drawing near, while dragging his feet. "I'm going to the kitchen to eat."

"Moti, we will wait for everyone and sit like human beings."

But some of the men were already following him to the kitchen. He opened a huge pot in which soft kneidlach balls floated and started pouring them into bowls. Rina tried to distract her mind from the dinner that was delayed and went up to Shoshi.

"So tell me how are things. How are the grandchildren? How's your mother?" When Shoshi started to answer, Rina's thoughts wandered off to her own family. For the coming summer holiday, she had promised Michal she would spend time with the youngest granddaughter, but the Indians' campaign could be her biggest achievement, and the Knesset elections that had just ended added more tension.

"Moti, I need a new tablecloth; this one isn't working," she called after him, cutting into her friend's story.

“Why do you need a new one?”

“Just bring one!” She ordered and apologized to her friend.

“And you were saying about your mother? What about her Filipino?” she asked, while peeling the plates off the table.

“Her Filipino is from Romania, but she needs to leave soon. Her visa is ending, and they’re sending her home.”

“You don’t want her to stay?”

“We did, but then we realized that she’s not doing a good enough job.”

Rina nodded actively and thought about all the things Evelyn could have done in Dad’s house instead of sitting with him outside for hours. Basic things, cleaning things that haven’t been touched for years. “And if that’s not enough, Mom’s jewelry is gone. Not so innocent, these women!”

“You don’t say!” Rina said and immediately stroked her earlobes and covered her golden earrings.

“I’m there three times a week, you get it? You take on a Filipino, and then you need to do all the work yourself. Unbelievable!”

Rina continued to nod.

“You don’t say!” Drora joined in. “There are horror stories about caregivers...” She looked at Rina, who seemed to have lost her color while picking up the new tablecloth from her husband’s hand.

“Have you considered a retirement home?” Rina skipped over Drora’s comment and asked Shosi, while waving the new cloth in the air, hoping it would land and fix itself as she had imagined.

“Yes, that’s what we’ll do now. We started to ask around. But listen, it costs a fortune. There’s a deposit of about a million or so, depending on the class. And each month we’ll need to pay more, of course.”

“How much per month?” Drora asked.

“It depends. There’s a flat with two bedrooms because the Filipino needs her own room. And that’s fifteen thousand a month, or a smaller place for nine and a bit,” replied Shoshi.

“So let the Filipino sleep in the living room; don’t go overboard! Who’s gonna pay all of this anyway!” declared Rina, adding to the list of tasks in her head to see if the social security money was deposited.

“I’m starving, are we eating?” the granddaughter asked again.

“Mom, I’m also really hungry,” said Michal. “When do we start? It’s like this every year.”

“Talk to your brother; he’s the one gone with your husband.”

“I’m calling Shmulik!” Michal stepped aside.

“We’re also looking into retirement homes now, for us,” said Drora. “There’s this franchise ‘Hugs for Life’ that our friends told us about. They’re running organized tours there. It has everything, and a pool. It’s just really expensive.”

“What, why doesn’t he answer?!” Michal stared at the phone screen.

“Send him a WhatsApp,” her daughter suggested.

“I believe we’ll need to sell the house for this,” Drora continued, ignoring the commotion around her. “We’ll eat up the inheritance while we’re alive. Not everyone is helping their kids as you are.” Michal and Rina’s eyes crossed.

“Maybe we don’t have to help the kids.” Moti suddenly stepped out of the kitchen.

“Here you go again with your advice,” Rina yelled at him, “and where will Yoni’le live?”

“Your parents didn’t help you?” Michal asked.

“Did you get a hold of him?”

“No, Mom, there’s no reception on his side.”

“Your generation is spoiled,” her dad pointed out.

“Our generation isn’t spoiled. I’m building my clinic and have three kids on top of that.”

“You have much more help than I did when I raised you.” Rina couldn’t help herself.

Michal was caught by surprise.

“I didn’t ask a shekel of you,” she replied to her mom in anger.

“My time is also precious, Michali.”

“So, you won’t come to babysit Shaked in the summer?”

“Wait, here, Yoni is calling me.” Rina waved the phone in her hand, thanking the saving bell.

“Gosh, I’m starving...” the granddaughter declared again, “let them in already!”

“Mom...” Yoni’s voice sounded frail.

“What’s going on, Yoni’le? Everyone’s waiting. Elijah will be here any second. We have plenty of parking spots here, you know.”

Everyone was silent around her. Time turned into a tight fishing line, bringing up nothing on its hook. “Mom, we can’t find Grandpa.”