

Before the Moment Passes By

I can hear children crying.

I see a bird soaring swiftly in the night sky.

The smell of sweat and dirt fills the air.

Carts pass by little huts.

Everywhere I look, I see people.

Walking. Pushing. Frightened.

As long as I stay with my family.

Just as long as they stay in my sight.

That's all I keep telling myself.

Leah, Bracha, Shlomo, Paisi.

Repeating their names in my head.

Making sure that they don't slip away from me.

Why do we have to go there tonight?

I have so much homework.

I'd rather go on my laptop.

I don't feel like celebrating the fact I can't have bread for a week.

I'm not going to even know half the people at this Seder.

"Frieda! Frieda, stay close!" my mother shouts.

Everything is getting more crowded.

I am in a sea of bodies.

It's all been happening so fast.

The cramped ride here was unbearable.

This morning I had to leave every possession I owned.

I didn't get to say goodbye to a single soul.

Not even to my country.

The country that used to love me.

"Anna, pass the chocolate matzah, please."

"Oh right," I reply. "It's coming. One second."

"Ahem!" says Grandpa. "Children please quiet down,

Time to finish up the Pesach Seder.

Anna, you can read the next prayer."

Ugh, I think. This is just what I want.

Why does he have to call me out like this?

To read some obscure Hebrew prayer in front of 16 family members.

Half of which I hardly know.

"Women and children over here!" he screams.

Why does he have to be so mean?

As if he's yelling at cattle?

Like the ones in that huge farm,

By our house,

In the old country.

But we're not near that farm anymore.

We're here. Scared. Vulnerable.

We are the cattle now.

"Women and children here!"

His voice is straining. Shriiil.

My hand is gripped tight to one of my sisters.

Leah.

My little sister, my best friend, my other half.

"Whatever happens Frieda," she whispers,

"Just don't leave me.

As long as we're together.

Just don't leave me."

We all make our way towards the man.

His eyes are cross-eyed.

I'll never forget those ugly eyes,

That ugly human, in all my life.

Here goes nothing.

Chadgadya ah ah ah...

Great. I've put them to sleep with this prayer.

Too bad they aren't actually asleep.

Then they wouldn't have heard me butcher that prayer.

I look up.

To see who had to hear my rendition.

Then I see her.
She's looking straight into my eyes.
Jessica, right?
A cousin. Right?
Only seen her at bar and bat mitzvahs really.
But I know there's more to this face.
Some story my father's told me before.
It has something to do with that face.
Some story.

Frieda, I keep telling myself, Frieda, get a grip of yourself.

Stay close to mother and father.

Stay calm.

It all will be okay.

Just stay calm.

Don't lose sight of them.

"You. To the Right!" the man with the cross-eyes screams.

Then just like that,

Mother disappears to the right. Forever.

Bracha is sent that way, too.

Paisi is forced left.

Father to the left.

Shlomo goes right.

I don't know what's going on.

Everyone is slipping away.

I am frozen with fear.

Where are they being taken?

I haven't let go of Leah's hand.

My younger sister.

I am not letting go of her.

No matter what.

The young woman. The one looking at me after my prayer.

I remember. Her grandma's name was Frieda.

Suddenly, he yells,

"You! To the right!"

Leah begins to cry hard.

Moving like a robot she goes right,

Before I can process it.

The cross-eyed man kicks me.

He shouts, "Go left!" into my ear.

My back aches. My eyes fill with dirt and tears.

He shows no emotion.

Leah stares into my eyes. Pleading. Saying goodbye.

I remember. The story, the one my father always told me.

**Of the day Grandpa Paisi was taken to Auschwitz.
The day my grandpa saw his mom for the last time.**

I don't know what lies ahead left.

I don't know what lies ahead right.

The day he saw his sister, Bracha, for the last time.

But I know if I don't act now my chance will pass.

I grab her by the arm.

I pull her towards me.

There's too much chaos going on for the cross-eyed man to notice.

I pull her close.

The day he saw his brother, Shlomo, for the last time.

I don't know if we're safe.

I just don't know.

But it wasn't the last day he saw his sisters.

Leah and Frieda.

Because they went to the left.

Frieda's final effort to keep what family she still had in her grasp.

Because she didn't just think of herself,

They lived. Frieda. Leah. My grandpa

They grew old.

They made families.

A hint of a smile crosses my face.

If it weren't for my Great Aunt Frieda.

If it weren't for her courage,

Her unselfish thoughts,

If she hadn't acted right then,

Where would half the smiling cheerful faces I see at this table be now?

The silly worries about my selfish teenage thoughts fade.

In that moment I begin to value,

The true power of thinking of others,

Life's too quick to stop and moan,

Stand up for yourself. Yet, stand up for others, too.

Before the moment passes by.

Like a magnificent bird soaring through the evening sky.