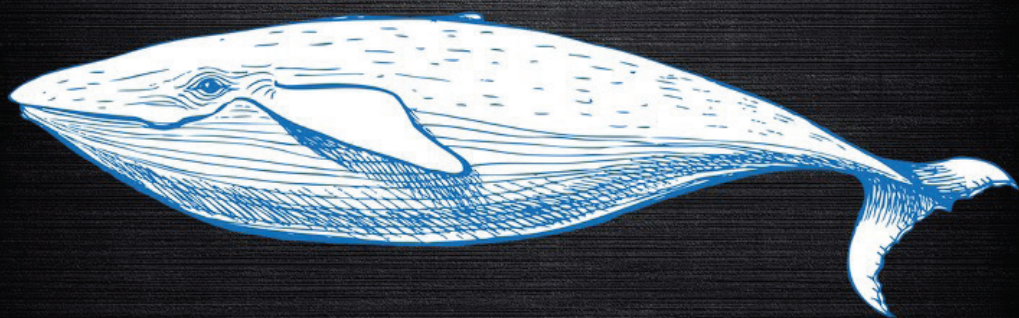


ESCAPING THE WHALE

The Holocaust is over. But is it ever
over for the next generation?



RUTH ROTKOWITZ

ESCAPING THE WHALE

THE HOLOCAUST IS OVER. BUT IS IT EVER
OVER FOR THE NEXT GENERATION?

RUTH ROTKOWITZ



ISBN 9789493056428 (ebook)

ISBN 9789493056411 (paperback)

ISBN 9789493056633 (hardcover)

Publisher: Amsterdam Publishers

info@amsterdampublishers.com

Copyright © Ruth Rotkowitz 2020

All right reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

PRAISE FOR ESCAPING THE WHALE

*In this sensitive, probing, achingly passionate novel, Ruth Rotkowitz leads us into the haunted world of Marcia Gold, a child of Holocaust survivors at a breaking point in her all-too-American life. On the surface, 28-year-old Marcia succeeds beautifully. She is a gifted high school guidance counselor devoted to helping pregnant teens, and she has the perfect boyfriend for a “nice Jewish girl.” But just below, everything is wrong. Marcia struggles with mysterious panic attacks she confides to no one; she believes that demons have secreted themselves into her Brooklyn apartment; she roils over the naïve girls she desperately wants to save; she obsesses over the Iranian hostage crisis that is rocking 1980 America. And when her private torment finally explodes, Marcia flees everything, her job, her lover, her home, only to discover that she cannot flee from herself and the traumatic legacy of her family’s past. A Jewish story, a woman’s story, a universal story about our struggle to defeat the demons – both human and imagined – that dare us to fight for our survival, our sanity, our humanity. - **Andrew R. Heinz**, author of *Jews and the American Soul**

Rotkowitz deftly address the theme of inherited trauma, artfully telling the moving story of a young woman who takes on the burden of her parents' Holocaust nightmares. While her parents survived the Holocaust and established a new life with their three American-born children, their middle child is haunted by the tragic experiences they had faced before her birth. This fast-paced book examines topics of family, love, and self-preservation. A remarkable first novel. -
Sheryl Bronkesh, President, Phoenix Holocaust Association

It's hard to believe this riveting new novel about a young woman's struggle with her own inner demons is the author's debut. That's how well Ruth Rotkowitz has created a protagonist whose desperate quest to "escape the whale" is often as dangerous and compelling as Ahab's quest to find it. -
Michael Zam, author and co-creator of *Feud: Bette and Joan*

A beautifully written account of a young woman grappling with the emotional upheaval often associated with children of Holocaust survivors. Set against the backdrop of the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979-1981, the author deftly takes us into the mind of this high school guidance counselor as she struggles with trauma at her job and in her personal relationships with family and friends. You'll want to cheer Marcia on her journey! -
Helen Locke, Education Committee, Phoenix Holocaust Association

*Readers looking for a novel with psychological insight will enjoy *Escaping the Whale* by Ruth Rotkowitz. We never know what goes on under the veneer people present to the world. In the novel, protagonist Marcia Gold deals with anxiety and delusions while presenting a 'normal' face to the world. Forced to deal with a series of crises, Marcia struggles to fight her demons while keeping up an outside appearance of competence. All this takes place amidst the shadow cast by Marcia's parents' Holocaust experience and the*

Iranian hostage crisis permeating the news. A good read! - **Maxine Cooper**, psychotherapist

You don't have to have been alive in 1980 to relate to the challenge of coming of age in a world enmeshed in international political brinkmanship and constantly changing definitions of freedom and belonging. Rotkowitz brilliantly demonstrates that the historical period forty years ago was a warm-up to the challenges we face now. Imagine being a young woman raised by parents traumatized by their escape from the Nazis, trying to lead the perfect life as the perfect daughter, while the entire country tensely waits for the resolution of the Iran hostage crisis. How do you take the risks needed to set yourself free from your loved ones' debilitating trauma? While reading this deeply personal and revelatory book, I couldn't help but think of all the second-generation trauma survivors, children of refugees to the United States and elsewhere, struggling to establish their own independence and identity today. Escaping the Whale reveals compelling answers in a harrowing yet beautiful story I could not put down. - **Pamela Burke**, PhD., social psychologist and N.J. Council of the Arts Fellowship Recipient for Fiction

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have loved the written word since I was a little girl, and this book would never have come into being without the many wonderful people in my life who also treasure the power and beauty of the written word, and who believe in my ability to deliver it.

The unwavering love and devotion of my husband of almost 50 years gives me the courage to pursue my writing. The encouragement and understanding I receive from my extraordinary daughter keeps me engaged in and appreciative of the creative process. My longest-serving cheering squad, which consists of my mother and my sister, has always given and continues to give me great joy. The three-way literary discourse in which we engage sustains me as we share our delight in reading, and I hope it continues for many years.

I am indebted to my parents and grandparents for their willingness to share stories of their pre-war lives in Europe and their escapes after the Nazi takeover. Their storytelling, while sometimes entertaining and sometimes harrowing, taught me from a young age to face facts and never shy away from the truth. Some

of their stories have made it into my book. They have my love and gratitude forever.

I am fortunate to have many relatives, friends, and fellow-writers – too numerous to name individually – who have been a constant source of emotional support. I only hope I have reciprocated in kind. Without their belief and encouragement, this book would remain locked in my head.

There are two organizations that have helped me immeasurably in dealing with the issues raised in *Escaping the Whale*. The first is the Phoenix Holocaust Association, through which I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with a dedicated group of people who reach out to the community in order to bring the truth of the Holocaust to the public. The openness of other children of survivors I have met through this organization has been a true inspiration.

The second organization is the Jewish Welcome Service of Vienna, Austria. The hard-working people of this amazing program warmly welcome children of Holocaust survivors who fled Austria during the war. With my sister and two cousins, I was able to visit Vienna as a guest of this program, and spent an incredible week connecting with my parents' home and thereby with my heritage, and learning about the Vienna of today. The experiences of that week were informative as well as emotional, nostalgic as well as hopeful. Participating in this program reinforced my bond with the story I tell in this book.

My heartfelt gratitude to Liesbeth Heenk of Amsterdam Publishers, who has made sure this book got to see the light of day. My deepest and sincerest thank you!!

The key eased into the narrow metal slit. The lock clicked, and the door swung inward. Instantaneously, hordes of bodies burst through the entrance a few feet away, swarming, like locusts, into the hallway. Clumps of bodies charged past Marcia's back, filling the air with shouts and curses. Arms, in a wild array of sizes and colors and flaunting an even wilder array of adornments, grabbed at one another. As Marcia fumbled with the key, piercing music assaulted the still, waiting air.

The invading Huns, Marcia thought as she slipped quickly inside and closed the door. The noises crashed against the other side of the door but were halted there. She was inside her office. Safe. She could almost imagine a baseball umpire standing there each morning, stomping dirt from his cleats and checking the invisible base on the floor, crossing his arms, then flinging them sideways, and yelling into her face: "Safe!" There might just be a miserable day at some unfortunate time in the future when that key would not slide in so smoothly and turn so easily. She would be left out there in the hall with that sweaty mass of high school students,

thousands of them, all brimming with energy and anger. Out there, she would be outnumbered; in here, one on one in the guidance office, she was on her ground. So much depending on a rusty key.

Flicking on the light, she immediately noticed the new plant. It stood on the floor, wedged into the corner, as if consigned there for punishment. A huge thing with monstrous leaves branching out in various directions, it seemed to be pleading for a shred of sunlight from the high casement window above it. “Another fuckin’ plant,” Marcia muttered, flinging her briefcase onto her desk. “Won’t he ever learn?”

“How do you like it?” called the ever-cheery voice of Timmy Murphy, Head of Guidance, from his inner office.

“Like it? It’s a monster! How did you get the goddam thing in here anyway?”

“It wasn’t easy.” Timmy appeared in the doorway, a broad smile on his fair, wide face. “My back seat is full of soil.”

Marcia shot Timmy a look. It was difficult to stay annoyed with him. Was it his basic good-heartedness, or the sprinkle of freckles across his pug nose? Despite his boyish looks, he commanded a great deal of respect. And without much effort, it seemed, thought Marcia churlishly.

“So why’d you bother?” she asked.

That old familiar churning was back, emanating from deep inside her gut, or maybe the back of her brain. That angry, nameless Thing that waited, lurking, to torment her.

“We got it as a gift this weekend,” he answered nonchalantly, “and Maggie didn’t want it. So I offered to bring it in.” He shrugged and smiled as his phone began to ring.

“Catch you later, Marsh!” he called merrily, sprinting into his office, still flashing the bold grin.

“Sure, sure, just dump it here,” Marcia mumbled, flopping into her chair. Tears began to well in her eyes. That nasty Thing devouring her insides was emerging from hibernation again, just as

it kept doing every time she thought it had finally died. Damn Timmy's morning cheerfulness! That was worse than the fuckin' plant. She bent her head and pressed the spot between her eyes. She could not let anything get to her now. Her first appointment was in ten minutes and it was only Monday morning. Why was it always so difficult to start the day?

When she looked up, there was that plant, ensconced in its spot, staring at her. As the only female guidance counselor, perhaps it was her fate to have to gaze directly into the neediness of this unwanted being. As she stared back, it seemed to become even larger. Was the damn thing growing by the minute? She flung that thought outward toward the ghastly thing, and it actually seemed to shrink back to its former proportions. If cheerful Timmy had the slightest clue that she felt her space and desires violated by the presence of that plant, he would certainly be shocked.

Its thick leaves made her think of the beefy hands of truck drivers. "Fuck you," she mouthed, and it seemed to droop those leaves just a bit. "You'll die like all the rest of them. Understand this: I *hate* plants! *Hate* them! So you haven't got a chance. I am *not* nurturing and loving, as I'm apparently supposed to be. I won't even pretend with you."

"You're getting the idea," commented Timmy from the doorway, sipping from a mug of coffee. "Maggie always says it's good to talk to plants."

"Talk to it? Timmy dear, I was not whispering sweet nothings just now. I was advising this thing to make out a last will and testament. Its days are numbered."

"Aw, come on, Marsh!" Timmy cajoled, laughing as he stepped jauntily in front of her desk, one hand in his trouser pocket and the other grasping the mug. "This'll cheer you up! It'll add color and new life to the place! Give you a reason to come in every morning!"

"A reason, Tim? Ah yes, so I can water this enormous thing that you didn't want to keep at home! Let me tell you something. If I

wanted color, it wouldn't be a depressing shade of institutional green, and new life I have enough of – all my students are pregnant, remember? Besides, who told you this stuff – your wife?" I should just sew pink curtains for the office, she thought.

Timmy laughed heartily as Marcia pushed her briefcase to the edge of the desk. As he chortled, she conjured up a comforting picture of the bottom drawer on the left side of her desk. Her secret stash. She pictured the little packets of colorful mints, the type usually left out in a big bowl near the cash registers at diners. She kept that drawer stocked, which comforted her. Those mints were not for eating. They were only for her to know they were there, waiting. In case of emergency. She looked up at Timmy, knowing he would never understand her drawer. No one would.

"This will be good for you, you'll see," Tim continued, undaunted. "You took care of all the other plants that were here, right?"

"The other plants! They all died! Remember? In my care, plants die! They do not flourish and grow, filling a room with warmth and beauty! They wither up and vanish under my nurturing hand! So don't bring any more in here! Unless you're going to keep them in *your* office!"

"This is not your office," Tim calmly remarked. "It's the outer office, for all of us."

Marcia looked up at him. He was not being mean; that wouldn't be Timmy. He was being clever, ready with the answers. But it stung. She was the only guidance counselor without a separate office, just a desk stuck in the 'outer' office, like a receptionist.

She had waited too long to reply, and Timmy's expression actually did contort into something like regret – he was aware that he'd crossed a line. Marcia waved her hand at him and flipped open her appointment book. "I know, Timmy, I know," she cooed. "I was the last guidance counselor appointed, and there weren't any offices left. It was nothing personal. So lucky me – I get this space here,

the domain of plants and coffee.” Her voice grew weary. “Really. Look at this thing – it’s already shrinking in fear of being placed in my loving care.”

She sighed deeply. “I’m in a rotten mood,” she added. She had to stay on good terms with him. Humor always worked when she fell into this state. “Hey, I know why you’ve brought it in, Tim. So I would have to sit here every day and confront this constant reminder of my failure as a woman. Right?” I’m always in a rotten mood, she almost said, even when I pretend otherwise.

Timmy laughed. It had worked. As his phone rang again, he backed out, chuckling.

The office looked even drearier today than it had on Friday, she decided, gazing dispiritedly around. It matched the drabness of the cloudy, overcast, March day outside. March – the month that doesn’t know what it is, that teases you with its indecision.

Just like this office, Marcia mused. Promising assistance and support, but usually delivering only aggravation. Or nothing.

Marcia shivered. It looks like one of those grayish basement rooms in old movies, she concluded, where corrupt cops interrogate suspects under a harsh white light. Is this where students – especially *her* charges, the pregnant ones – could feel they were getting help? A real hellhole, she muttered.

Yet, upon arriving each morning and viewing her desk from the students’ angle, Marcia felt an unmistakable surge of pride in her work. She helped people daily. So why were there days when that pride seemed to be slipping away, drowning in a sea of gloom?

She heard Timmy’s hearty laugh from his office and could just see him throwing back his head, his feet up on his desk. A knock at the door signaled Marcia’s first appointment. “Come in!” she called, straightening in her chair, instantly invigorated by the need to suddenly switch modes. The knob turned but stuck. She had inadvertently locked it when she’d entered. Again. Luckily, Tim wasn’t around to make fun of her for that, an activity he relished.

He didn't understand the importance of safety. Safety is everything.

Marcia got up to unlock the door. The appointment was right on time – it would keep her on schedule, and keep her away from the web of grotesque, intertwining plant leaves in which her brain was becoming ensnared.