

My Michael

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I AM WRITING this because people I loved have died. I am writing this because when I was young I was full of the power of loving, and now that power of loving is dying. I do not want to die.

I am thirty years of age and a married woman. My husband is Dr. Michael Gonen, a geologist, a good-natured man. I loved him. We met in Terra Sancta College ten years ago. I was a first-year student at the Hebrew University, in the days when lectures were still given in Terra Sancta College.

This is how we met:

One winter's day at nine o'clock in the morning I slipped coming downstairs. A young stranger caught me by the elbow. His hand was strong and full of restraint. I saw short fingers with flat nails. Pale fingers with soft black down on the knuckles. He hurried to stop me falling, and I leaned on his arm until the pain passed. I felt at a loss, because it is disconcerting to slip suddenly in front of strangers: searching, inquisitive eyes and malicious smiles. And I was embarrassed because the young stranger's hand was broad and warm. As he held me I could feel the warmth of his fingers through the sleeve of the blue woolen dress my mother had knitted me. It was winter in Jerusalem.

He asked me whether I had hurt myself.

I said I thought I had twisted my ankle.

He said he had always liked the word "ankle." He smiled. His smile was embarrassed and embarrassing. I blushed. Nor did I refuse when he asked if he could take me to the cafeteria on the ground floor. My leg hurt. Terra Sancta College is a Christian convent which was loaned to the Hebrew University after the 1948 war when the buildings on Mount Scopus were cut off. It is a cold building; the corridors are tall and wide. I felt distracted as I followed this young stranger who was holding on to me. I was happy to respond to his voice. I was unable to look straight at him and examine his face. I sensed, rather than saw, that his face was long and lean and dark.

"Now let's sit down," he said.

We sat down, neither of us looking at the other. Without asking what I wanted he ordered two cups of coffee. I loved my late father more than any other man in the world. When my new acquaintance turned his head I saw that his hair was cropped short and that he was unevenly shaven. Dark bristles showed, especially under his chin. I do not know why this detail struck me as important, in fact as a point in his favor. I liked his smile and his fingers, which were playing with a teaspoon as if they had an independent life of their own. And the spoon enjoyed being held by them. My own finger felt a faint urge to touch his chin, on the spot where he had not shaved properly and where the bristles sprouted.

Michael Gonen was his name.

He was a third-year geology student. He had been born and brought up in Holon. "It's cold in this Jerusalem of yours."

"My Jerusalem? How do you know I'm from Jerusalem?"

He was sorry, he said, if he was wrong for once, but he did not think he was wrong. He had learned by now to spot a Jerusalemite at first sight. As he spoke he looked into my eyes for the first time. His eyes were gray. I noticed a flicker of amusement in them, but not a cheerful flicker. I told him that his guess was right. I was indeed a Jerusalemite.

"Guess? Oh, no."

He pretended to look offended, the corners of his mouth smiling: No, it was not a guess. He could see that I was a Jerusalemite. "See?" Was this part of his geology course? No, of course not. As a matter of fact, it was something he had learned from cats. From cats? Yes, he loved watching cats. A cat would never make friends with anyone who was not disposed to like him. Cats are never wrong about people.

"You seem to be a happy sort of person," I said happily. I laughed, and my laugh betrayed me.

Afterwards Michael Gonen invited me to accompany him to the third floor of Terra Sancta College, where some instructional films about the Dead Sea and the Arava were about to be shown.

On the way up, as we passed the place on the staircase where I had slipped earlier, Michael took hold of my sleeve once again. As if there were a danger of slipping again on that particular step. Through the blue wool I could feel every one of his five fingers. He coughed drily and I looked at him. He caught me looking at him, and his face reddened. Even his ears turned red. The rain beat at the windows.

"What a downpour," Michael said.

"Yes, a downpour," I agreed enthusiastically, as if I had suddenly discovered that we were related.

Michael hesitated. Then he added:

"I saw the mist early this morning and there was a strong wind blowing."

"In my Jerusalem, winter is winter," I replied gaily, stressing "my Jerusalem" because I wanted to remind him of his opening words. I wanted him to go on talking, but he could not think of a reply; he is not a witty man. So he smiled again. On a rainy day in Jerusalem in Terra Sancta College on the stairs between the first floor and the second floor. I have not forgotten.

In the film we saw how the water is evaporated until the pure salt appears: white crystals gleaming on gray mud. And the minerals in the crystals like delicate veins, very fine and brittle. The gray mud split open gradually before our very eyes, because in this educational film the natural processes had been speeded up. It was a silent film. Black blinds were drawn over the windows to shut out the light of day. The light outside, in any case, was faint and murky. There was an old lecturer who occasionally

uttered comments and explanations which I could not understand. The scholar's voice was slow and resonant. I remembered the agreeable voice of Dr. Rosenthal, who had cured me of diphtheria when I was a child of nine. Now and then the lecturer indicated with the help of a pointer the significant features of the pictures, to prevent his students' minds from wandering from the point. I alone was free to notice details which had no instructional value, such as the miserable but determined desert plants which appeared on the screen again and again near the machinery which extracted the potash. By the dim light of the magic lantern I was free too to contemplate the features, the arm, and the pointer of the ancient lecturer, who looked like an illustration in one of the old books I loved. I remembered the dark woodcuts in *Moby Dick*.

Outside, several heavy, hoarse rolls of thunder sounded. The rain beat furiously against the darkened window, as if demanding that we listen with rapt attention to some urgent message it had to deliver.

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MY LATE FATHER often used to say: Strong people can do almost anything they want to do, but even the strongest cannot choose what they want to do. I am not particularly strong.

Michael and I arranged to meet that same evening in Cafe Atara in Ben Yehuda Street. Outside an absolute storm was raging, beating down furiously on the stone walls of Jerusalem.

Austerity regulations were still in force. We were given ersatz coffee and tiny paper bags of sugar. Michael made a joke about this, but his joke was not funny. He is not a witty man—and perhaps he could not tell it in an amusing way. I enjoyed his efforts; I was glad that I was causing him some exertion. It was because of me that he was coming out of his cocoon and trying to be amused and amusing. When I was nine I still used to wish I could grow up as a man instead of a woman. As a child I always played with boys and I always read boys' books. I used to wrestle, kick, and climb. We lived in Kiryat Shmuel, on the edge of the suburb called Katamon. There was a derelict plot of land on a slope, covered with rocks and thistles and pieces of scrap iron, and at the foot of the slope stood the house of the twins. The twins were Arabs, Halil and Aziz, the sons of Rashid Shahada. I was a princess and they were my bodyguard, I was a conqueror and they my officers, I was an explorer and they my native bearers, a captain and they my crew, a master spy and they my henchmen. Together we would explore distant streets, prowl through the woods, hungry, panting, teasing Orthodox children, stealing into the woods around St. Simeon's Convent, calling the British policemen names. Giving chase and running away, hiding and suddenly dashing out. I ruled over the twins. It was a cold pleasure, so remote.

Michael said:

"You're a coy girl, aren't you?"

When we had finished drinking our coffee Michael took a pipe out of his overcoat pocket and put it on the table between us. I was wearing brown corduroy trousers and a chunky red sweater, such as girls at the University used to wear at that time to produce a casual effect. Michael remarked shyly that I had seemed more feminine that morning in the blue woolen dress. To him, at least.

"You seemed different this morning, too," I said.

Michael was wearing a gray overcoat. He did not take it off the whole time we sat in Cafe Atara. His cheeks were glowing from the bitter cold outside. His body was lean and angular. He picked up his unlit pipe and traced shapes with it on the tablecloth. His fingers, playing with the pipe, gave me a feeling of peace. Perhaps he had suddenly regretted his remark about my clothes; as if correcting a mistake, Michael said he thought I was a pretty girl. As he said it he stared fixedly at the pipe. I am not particularly strong, but I am stronger than this young man.

"Tell me about yourself," I said.

Michael said:

"I didn't fight in the *Palmach*. I was in the Signal Corps. I was a radio operator in the Carmeli Brigade."

Then he started talking about his father. Michael's father was a widower. He worked in the water department of the Holon municipality.

Rashid Shahada, the twins' father, was a clerk in the technical department of the Jerusalem municipality under the British. He was a cultivated Arab, who behaved toward strangers like a waiter.

Michael told me that his father spent most of his salary on his education. Michael was an only child, and his father cherished high hopes for him. He refused to recognize that his son was an ordinary young man. For instance, he used to read the exercises which Michael wrote for his geology course with awe, commending them with such set phrases as: "This is very scientific work. Very thorough." His father's greatest wish was for Michael to become a professor in Jerusalem, because his paternal grandfather had taught natural sciences in the Hebrew teachers seminary in Grodno. He had been very well thought of. It would be nice, Michael's father thought, if the chain could pass on from one generation to another.

"A family isn't a relay race, with a profession as the torch," I said.

"But I can't tell my father that," Michael said. "He's a sentimental man, and he uses Hebrew expressions in the way that people used to handle fragile pieces of precious china. Tell me something about your family now."

I told him that my father had died in 1943. He was a quiet man. He used to talk to people as if he had to appease them and purchase a sympathy he did not deserve. He had a radio and electrical business—sales and simple repairs. Since his death my mother had lived at Kibbutz Nof Harim with my older brother, Emanuel. "In the evenings she sits with Emanuel and his wife, Rina, drinking tea and trying to teach their son manners, because his parents belong to a generation which despises good manners. All day she shuts herself up in a small room on the edge of the kibbutz reading Turgenev and Gorki in Russian, writing me letters in broken Hebrew, knitting

and listening to the radio. That blue dress you liked on me this morning—my mother knitted it."

Michael smiled:

"It might be nice for your mother and my father to meet. I'm sure they would find a lot to talk about. Not like us, Hannah—sitting here talking about our parents. Are you bored?" he asked anxiously, and as he asked he flinched, as if he had hurt himself by asking.

"No," I said. "No, I'm not bored. I like it here."

Michael asked whether I hadn't said that merely out of politeness. I insisted. I begged him to tell me more about his father. I said that I liked the way he talked.

Michael's father was an austere, unassuming man. He gave over his evenings voluntarily to running the Holon workingmen's club. Running? Arranging benches, filing chits, duplicating notices, picking up cigarette butts after meetings. It might be nice if our parents could meet ... Oh, he had already said that once. He apologized for repeating himself and boring me. What was I studying at the University? Archaeology?

I told him I was rooming with an Orthodox family in Achva. In the mornings I worked as a teacher in Sarah Zeldin's kindergarten in Kerem Avraham. In the afternoons I attended lectures on Hebrew literature. But I was only a first-year student.

"Student rhymes with prudent." Straining to be witty in his anxiety to avoid pauses in the conversation, Michael resorted to a play on words. But the point was not clear, and he tried to rephrase it. Suddenly he stopped talking and made a fresh, furious attempt at lighting his obstinate pipe. I enjoyed his discomfiture. At that time I was still repelled by the sight of the rough men my friends used to worship in those days: great bears of *Palmach*-men who used to tackle you with a gushing torrent of deceptive kindness; thick-limbed tractor drivers coming all dusty from the Negev like marauders carrying off the women of some captured city. I loved the embarrassment of the student Michael Gonen in Cafe Atara on a winter's night.

A famous scholar came into the cafe in the company of two women. Michael leaned toward me to whisper his name in my ear. His lips may have brushed my hair. I said:

"I can see right through you. I can read your mind. You're saying to yourself: 'What's going to happen next? Where do we go from here?' Am I right?"

Michael reddened suddenly like a child caught stealing sweets:

"I've never had a regular girlfriend before."

"Before?"

Thoughtfully Michael moved his empty cup. He looked at me. Deep down, underneath his meekness, a suppressed sneer lurked in his eyes.

"Till now."

A quarter of an hour later the famous scholar left with one of the women. Her friend moved over to a table in a corner and lit a cigarette. Her expression was bitter.

Michael remarked:

"That woman is jealous."

"Of us?"

"Of you, perhaps." He tried to cover up. He was ill at ease, because he was trying too hard. If only I could tell him that his efforts did him credit. That I found his fingers fascinating. I could not speak, but I was afraid to keep silent. I told Michael that I adored meeting the celebrities of Jerusalem, the writers and scholars. It was an interest I had inherited from my father. When I was small my father used to point them out to me in the street. My father was extremely fond of the phrase "world-famous." He would whisper excitedly that some professor who had just vanished into a florist's shop was world-famous, or that some man out shopping was of international fame. And I would see a diminutive old man cautiously feeling his way like a stranger in an unfamiliar city. When we read the Books of the Prophets at school, I imagined the Prophets as being like the writers and scholars my father had pointed out to me: men of refined features, bespectacled, with neatly trimmed white beards, their pace troubled and hesitant, as if they were walking down the steep slope of a glacier. And when I tried to imagine these frail old men thundering against the sins of the people, I smiled; I thought that at the height of their fury their voices would dry up and they would merely emit a high-pitched shriek. If a writer or university professor came into his shop in Jaffa Road, my father would come home looking as if he had seen a vision. He would repeat solemnly casual words they had spoken, and study their utterances as if they were rare coins. He was always looking for hidden meanings in their words, because he saw life as a lesson from which one had to learn a moral. He was an attentive man. Once my father took me and my brother Emanuel to the Tel Or Cinema on a Saturday morning to hear Martin Buber and Hugo Bergmann speak at a meeting sponsored by a pacifist organization. I still remember a curious episode. As we were leaving the auditorium Professor Bergmann stopped in front of my father and said, "I really did not expect to see you in our midst today, my dear Dr. Liebermann. I beg your pardon—you are not Professor Liebermann? Yet I feel certain we have met. Your face, sir, seems very familiar." Father stuttered. He blanched as if he had been accused of some foul deed. The professor, too, was confused, and apologized for his mistake. Perhaps on account of his embarrassment the scholar touched my shoulder and said, "In any case, my dear sir, your daughter—your daughter?—is a very pretty girl." And beneath his mustache a gentle smile spread. My father never forgot this incident as long as he lived. He used to recount it again and again, with excitement and delight. Even when he sat in his armchair, clad in a dressing gown, his glasses perched high on his forehead and his mouth drooping wearily, my father looked as if he were silently listening to the voice of some secret power. "And you know, Michael, still, to this day, I sometimes think that I shall marry a young scholar who is destined to become world-famous. By the light of his reading lamp my husband's face will hover among piles of old German tomes; I shall creep in on tiptoe to put a cup of tea down on the desk, empty the ashtray, and quietly close the shutters, then leave without his noticing me. Now you'll laugh at me."