

# **My Michael**

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Amos Oz

*Translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange  
in collaboration with the author*

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## Translator's Note

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The translator's task is not simply impossible, it is also extremely difficult, and especially so in a book, such as *My Michael*, whose essence consists, to a large extent, in the texture of the language. A further complication is that Israeli Hebrew naturally reflects the varied linguistic backgrounds of the people who speak it, and the reader may amuse himself by spotting among the characters in this book examples of almost all the national and linguistic groups who go to make up the population of Israel. Among the older generation Polish and Yiddish predominate; Hannah's mother speaks both these but is more at home in Russian and speaks Hebrew with difficulty; then there are Germans, Arabs, Persians, Yemenites, and even Bokharians. Each of the characters, including native Hebrew-speakers like Michael and Hannah and their contemporaries, speaks his own distinctive brand of Hebrew; I have done my best to convey this variety in the translation, but I should like to draw attention to it here because it is an integral feature of the book, which might confuse or elude a reader who has never experienced it.

The Israeli background is unfamiliar, but not, I hope, unintelligible. The calendar is, of course, the Jewish calendar, dominated by the Sabbath, which begins and ends at sunset. As for the urban landscape of Jerusalem, which is so prominent in the story, and the interplay of the various factions of the population, Jews and Arabs, Europeans and Orientals, religious and "enlightened" Jews, I cannot hope to add anything to Hannah's own vivid and penetrating commentary.

A few specific points which may be helpful or interesting: It was pointed out by Israeli critics that Michael's surname, Gonen, means "protector," and it is only fair to offer this information, for what it is worth, to the English reader. I have kept several non-Hebrew words and phrases in their original languages; where they are not self-explanatory I have occasionally inserted the translation. ("*Cholera*," on p. 227, is not a diagnosis, but a common Polish curse.) One or two of the names have affectionate diminutive forms—"Hannah," for example, becomes "Hannele" (in Yiddish) or "Hanka" (in Russian). The *Palmach* was the striking-force of the *Haganah*, the Jewish defense organization set up in Palestine during the British Mandate. In transliterating the Hebrew and Arabic names I have aimed at a certain consistency, basing myself on the current pronunciation, but I have sometimes surrendered to the claims of familiar usage. *Ch*, *kh*, and frequently *h* are to be pronounced like the *ch* in *loch*.

Finally, although I have enjoyed and benefited from the close collaboration of the author, any shortcomings in the translation are mine, not his, and I take full responsibility for them.

N. de

Cambridge  
November 1971

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.

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 prince 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."

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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 and 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 another 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."

TEN O' CLOCK.

Michael and I each paid our own checks, as students do, and went out into the night. The sharp frost seared our faces. I breathed out, and watched my breath mingle with his. The cloth of his overcoat was coarse, heavy, and pleasant to touch. I had no gloves, and Michael insisted I wear his. They were rough, worn leather gloves. Streams of water ran down the gutter toward Zion Square, as if something sensational was happening in the center of town. A tightly wrapped couple walked past, their arms round each other. The girl said:

"That's impossible. I can't believe it."

And her partner laughed:

"You're very naïve."

We stood for a moment or two, not knowing what to do. We only knew that we did not want to part. The rain stopped and the air grew colder. I found the cold unbearable. I shivered. We watched the water running down the gutter. The road was shiny. The asphalt reflected the broken yellow glare of car headlights. Disjointed thoughts flashed through my mind—how to keep hold of Michael for a little longer.

Michael said:

"I'm plotting against you, Hannah."

I said:

"Be careful. You might find yourself hoist on your own petard."

"I'm plotting dark deeds, Hannah."

His trembling lips betrayed him. For an instant he looked like a big, sad child, a child with most of its hair shaved off. I wanted to buy him a hat. I wanted to touch him.

Suddenly Michael raised his arm. A taxi screeched to a sodden halt. Then we were together inside its warm belly. Michael told the driver to drive wherever he felt like taking us, he didn't mind. The driver shot me a sly glance, full of filthy pleasure. The panel lights cast a dim red glow on his face, as if the skin had been peeled off and his red flesh laid bare. That taxi driver had the face of a mocking satyr. I have not forgotten.

We drove for about twenty minutes, with no idea where we were going. Our warm breath misted up the windows. Michael talked about geology. In Texas people dig for water and suddenly an oil well gushes up instead. Perhaps there are untapped supplies of oil in Israel too. Michael said "lithosphere." He said "sandstone," "chalk bed." He said "Pre-Cambrian," "Cambrian," "metamorphic rocks," "igneous rocks," "tectonics." For the first time then I felt that inner tension which I still feel whenever I hear my husband talking his strange language. These words relate to facts which have meaning for

me, for me alone, like a message transmitted in code. Beneath the surface of the earth, opposed endogenic and exogenic forces are perpetually at work. The thin sedimentary rocks are in a continuous process of disintegration under the force of pressure. The lithosphere is a crust of hard rocks. Beneath the crust of hard rocks rages the blazing nucleus, the siderosphere.

I am not absolutely certain that Michael used these exact words during that taxi ride, in Jerusalem, at night, in the winter of 1950. But some of them I heard from him for the first time that night, and I was gripped. It was like a strange, sinister message, which I could not decipher. Like an unsuccessful attempt to reconstruct a nightmare which has faded from memory. Elusive as a dream.

Michael's voice as he spoke these words was deep and restrained. The dashboard lights glared red in the darkness. Michael spoke like a man weighed down with a grave responsibility, as if accuracy was at that moment of supreme importance. If he had taken my hand and pressed it in his I should not have withdrawn it. But the man I loved was carried away on a subdued tide of enthusiasm. I had been wrong. He could be very strong when he wanted to be. Much stronger than I. I accepted him. His words lulled me into that mood of tranquillity which I experience after a siesta; the tranquillity of waking to twilight, when time seems soft and I am tender and things around are tender.

The taxi passed through drenched streets which we could not identify because the windows were misted up. The windshield wipers caressed the windshield. They beat in twin, steady rhythm, as if in obedience to some inviolable law. After twenty minutes' drive Michael told the driver to stop, because he was not rich and our trip had already cost him the price of five lunches in the student restaurant at the end of Mamillah Road.

We got out of the taxi in a place which was unfamiliar: a steep alleyway paved with dressed stones. The paving stones were rain-lashed, for in the meantime the rain had started again. A fierce wind beat at us. We walked slowly. We were soaked to the skin. Michael's hair was drenched. His face was amusing; he had the look of a crying child. Once he stretched out a single finger and wiped away a drop of rain which was clinging to the tip of my chin. Suddenly we were in the square in front of the Generali Building. A winged lion, a rain-soaked, frozen lion, gazed down on us from above. Michael was ready to swear that the lion was laughing under his breath.

"Can't you hear him, Hannah? Laughing! He's looking at us and laughing. And I for one am inclined to agree with him."

I said:

"Maybe it's a pity that Jerusalem is such a small city that you can't get lost in it."

Michael accompanied me along Melisanda Street, the Street of the Prophets, and then along Strauss Street, where the medical center is. We did not meet a living soul. It was as if the inhabitants had abandoned the city and left it to the two of us. We were lords of the city. When I was a child I used to play a game I called "Princess of the City." The twins acted the part of submissive subjects. Sometimes I made them act rebellious subjects, and then I would humble them relentlessly. It was an exquisite thrill.

In winter, at night, the buildings of Jerusalem look like gray shapes against a black backcloth. A landscape pregnant with suppressed violence. Jerusalem can sometimes be an abstract city: stones, pine trees, and rusting iron.

Stiff-tailed cats crossed the deserted streets. The alley walls reflected a counterfeit echo of our footsteps, making them dull and long. We stood outside the door of my house for about five minutes. I said:

"Michael, I can't invite you up to my room for a hot glass of tea, because my landlord and his wife are religious people. When I took the room I promised them not to entertain men there. And it's half past eleven now."

When I said "men" we both smiled.

"I didn't expect you to invite me up to your room now," Michael said. I said:

"Michael Gonen, you're a perfect gentleman, and I'm grateful to you for this evening. All of it. If you were to invite me to share another evening like it with you, I don't suppose I should refuse."

He bent over me. Forcefully he gripped my left hand in his right. Then he kissed my hand. The movement was abrupt and violent, as if he had been rehearsing it all along the way, as if he had mentally counted to three before he bent over to kiss me. Through the leather of the glove he had lent me when we left the cafe a strong, warm wave entered me. A moist breeze stirred the treetops and felt quiet. Like a duke in an English film Michael kissed my hand through his glove, only Michael was drenched and he forgot to smile and the glove was not white.

I took off both gloves and handed them to him. He hurriedly put them on while they were still warm from the heat of my body. An invalid coughed wretchedly behind the closed shutters on the first floor.

"How strange you are today," I smiled.

As if I had known him on other days, too.

I HAVE FOND memories of an attack of diphtheria I suffered as a child of nine. It was winter. For several weeks I lay on my bed opposite the south-facing window. Through the window I could see a gloomy expanse of fog and rain: South Jerusalem, the shadow of the Bethlehem hills, Emek Refaim, the rich Arab suburbs in the valley. It was a winter world without details, a world of shapes in an expanse ranging in color from light to dark gray. I could see the trains, too, and I could follow them with my eyes a long way along Emek Refaim from the soot-blackened station as far as the curves at the foot of the Arab village of Beit Safafa. I was a general on the train. Troops loyal to me commanded the high ground. I was an emperor in hiding. An emperor whose authority was undiminished by distance and isolation. In my dreams the southern suburbs were transformed into the St. Pierre and Miquelon islands, which I had come across in my brother's stamp album. Their name had caught my fancy. I used to carry my dreams over into the world of waking. Night and day were one continuous world. My high fever contributed to this effect. Those were dizzy, multicolored weeks. I was a queen. My cool mastery was challenged by open rebellion. I was captured by the mob, imprisoned, humiliated, tortured. But a handful of loyal supporters in dark corners were plotting to rescue me. I had confidence in them. I relished my cruel sufferings because out of them rose pride. My returning authority. I was reluctant to recover. According to the doctor, Dr. Rosenthal, there are some children who prefer to be ill, who refuse to be cured, because illness offers, in a sense, a state of freedom. When I recovered, at the end of the winter, I experienced a feeling of exile. I had lost my powers of alchemy, the ability to make my dreams carry me over the dividing line between sleeping and waking. To this day I feel a sense of disappointment on waking. I mock at my vague longing to fall seriously ill.

After saying good night to Michael I went up to my room. I made some tea. For a quarter of an hour I stood in front of the paraffin heater warming myself and thinking of nothing in particular. I peeled an apple, sent to me by my brother Emanuel from his kibbutz, Nof Harim. I recalled how Michael had tried three or four times to light his pipe without success. Texas is a fascinating place: A man digs a hole in his garden to plant a fruit tree, and suddenly a jet of oil gushes out. This was a whole dimension I had never considered before, the hidden worlds which lie beneath every spot I tread. Minerals and quartzes and dolomites and all that kind of thing.

Then I wrote a short letter to my mother and my brother and his family. I told them all that I was well. In the morning I must remember to buy a stamp.

In the literature of the Hebrew Enlightenment there are frequent references to the conflict between light and darkness. The writer is committed to the eventual triumph of light. I must say that I prefer the darkness. Especially in summer. The white light terrorizes Jerusalem. It puts the city to shame. But in my heart there is no conflict between darkness and light. I was reminded of how I had slipped on the stairs that morning in Terra Sancta College. It was a humiliating moment. One of the reasons why I enjoy being asleep is that I hate making decisions. Awkward things sometimes happen in dreams, but some force always operates which makes decisions for you, and you are free to be like the boat in the song, with all the crew asleep, drifting wherever the dream carries you. The soft hammock, the sea gulls, and the expanse of water which is both a gently heaving surface and also a

maelstrom of unplumbed depths. I know that the deep is thought of as a cold place. But it is not always so, and not entirely. I read in a book once about warm streams and underwater volcanoes. At a point deep below the freezing ocean depths there is sometimes a warm cave hidden. When I was small I read and reread my brother's copy of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. There are some rich nights when I discover a secret way through the watery depths and the darkness among green and clammy sea-creatures until I beat at the door of the warm cavern. That is my home. There a shadowy captain waits for me surrounded by books and pipes and charts. His beard is black, his eyes hold a hungry gleam. Like a savage he seizes me, and I soothe his raging hatred. Tiny fish swim through us, as if we were both made of water. As they pass through they impart minute flickers of searing pleasure.

I read two chapters of Mapu's *Love of Zion* for the next day's seminar. If I were Tamar I would make Amnon crawl to me on his knees for seven nights. When he finally confessed the torments of his love in scriptural language I would order him to transport me in a sailing ship to the isles of the archipelago, to that faraway place where Red Indians turn into delectable sea-creatures with silver spots and electric sparks, and sea gulls float in blue space.

Sometimes at night I see a bleak Russian steppe. Frozen plains coated with a crust of bluish frost which reflects the flickering light of a wild moon. There is a sledge and a bearskin rug and the black back of a shrouded driver and furiously galloping horses and wolves' eyes glowing in the darkness round about and a solitary dead tree stands on the white slope and it is night within night on the steppe and the stars keep sinister watch. Suddenly the driver turns toward me a heavy face carved by some drunken sculptor. Icicles hang from the ends of his tangled mustache. His mouth is slightly open, as if it is he who is producing the howl of the biting wind. The dead tree which stands all alone on the slope on the steppe is not there by chance, it has a function which on waking I cannot name. But even when I wake I remember that it has a function. And so I return not entirely empty-handed.

In the morning I went out to buy a stamp. I posted the letter to Nof Harim. I ate a roll and yoghurt and drank a glass of tea. Mrs. Tarnopoler, my landlady, came into my room to ask me to buy a can of paraffin on my way home. While I drank my tea I managed to read another chapter of Mapu. At Sara Zeldin's kindergarten one of the girls said:

"Hannah, you're as happy as a little girl today!"

I put on the blue woolen dress and tied a red silk kerchief round my neck. When I looked in the mirror I was delighted to see that with the neckerchief I looked like a daring girl who is suddenly likely to lose her head.

Michael was waiting for me at midday at the entrance to Terra Sancta, by the heavy iron gates with their dark metal ornaments. He was carrying a box full of geological specimens in his arms. Even if it had occurred to me, say, to shake hands with him, I could not have.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" I said. "Who do you think you're waiting for? Did anyone tell you to wait here?"

"It's not raining now and you're not soaking wet," Michael said. "When you're wet you're much less bold."

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Then Michael drew my attention to the sly, leering smile of the bronze statue of the Virgin on top of the building. Her arms were outstretched as if she were trying to embrace the whole city.

I went downstairs to the library basement. In a narrow, gloomy passage, lined with dark, sealed boxes, I met the kindly librarian, a short man who wore a skullcap. I was in the habit of exchanging greetings and witticisms with him. He too, as if making a discovery, asked me:

"What has come over you today, young lady? Good news? If you will permit me to say so, 'bright joy illumines Hannah in a most amazing manner.'"

In the Mapu seminar the lecturer related a typical anecdote, a story about a fanatically orthodox Jewish sect who claimed that ever since Abraham Mapu had published *Love of Zion* there had been more benches in the houses of ill fame, Heaven forbid.

What has got into everyone today? Have they been talking to each other?

Mrs. Tarnopoler, my landlady, had bought a new stove. She beamed benignly at me.



THAT EVENING the sky brightened a little. Blue patches drifted eastward. The air was damp.

Michael and I arranged to meet outside the Edison Cinema. Whichever of us arrived first would buy two tickets for the film, which starred Greta Garbo. The heroine of the film dies of unrequited love after sacrificing her body and her soul for a worthless man. Throughout the film I suppressed an overpowering desire to laugh. Her suffering and his worthlessness seemed like two terms in a simple mathematical equation, which I was not tempted to try to solve. I felt full to overflowing. I laid my head on Michael's shoulder and watched the screen sideways, until the pictures turned into a capering succession of different tones graded between black and white, but mainly various shades of light gray.

As we came out Michael said:

"When people are contented and have nothing to do, emotion spreads like a malignant tumor."

"What a trite remark," I said.

Michael said:

"Look here, Hannah, art isn't my subject. I'm just a humble scientist, as they say."

I refused to relent:

"That's also trite."

Michael smiled:

"Well?"

Whenever he cannot answer he smiles, just like a child who notices grownups doing something ridiculous—an embarrassed, embarrassing smile.

We strolled down Isaiah Street toward Geula Street. Sharp stars glittered in the Jerusalem sky. Many of the street lamps of the British Mandate period were destroyed by shell-fire during the War of Independence. In 1950 most of them were still shattered. Shadowy hills showed in the distance at the ends of the streets.

"This isn't a city," I said, "it's an illusion. We're crowded in on all sides by the hills—Castel, Mount Scopus, Augusta Victoria, Nebi Samwil, Miss Carey. All of a sudden the city seems very insubstantial."

Michael said:

"When it's been raining Jerusalem makes one feel sad. Actually, Jerusalem always makes one feel sad, but it's a different sadness at every moment of the day and at every time of the year."

I felt Michael's arm round my shoulder. I buried my hands in the pockets of my warm corduroy

trousers. Once I took one hand out and touched him under the chin. He was clean-shaven today, not like the first time we had met, in Terra Sancta. I said he must have shaved especially to please me.

Michael was embarrassed. He just happened, he lied, to have bought a new razor that day. I laughed. He hesitated a moment, then decided to join in.

In Geula Street we saw an Orthodox woman, wearing a white kerchief, open a second-floor window and squeeze half her body out as if she were about to throw herself down into the street. But she merely closed the heavy iron shutters. The hinges groaned as if with despair.

When we passed the playground of Sarah Zeldin's kindergarten I told Michael that I worked there. Was I a strict teacher? He imagined I was. What made him think that? He didn't know what to answer. Just like a child, I said, starting to say something and not knowing how to finish. Expressing an opinion and not daring to defend it. A child.

Michael smiled.

From one of the yards, on the corner of Malachi Street, came the sound of cats screeching. It was a loud, hysterical shriek, followed by two strangled wails, and finally a low sob, faint and submissive as if there were no sense, no hope.

Michael said:

"They're crying out in love. Did you know, Hannah, that cats are most in heat in winter, on the coldest days? When I'm married I shall keep a cat. I always wanted to have one but my father wouldn't let me. I'm an only child. Cats cry out in love because they're not bound by any constraint or convention. I imagine that a cat in heat feels as if it's been grabbed hold of by a stranger and is being squeezed to death. The pain is physical. Burning. No, I didn't learn that in geology. I was afraid you'd make fun of me talking like this. Let's go."

I said:

"You must have been a very spoiled child."

"I was the hope of the family," Michael said. "I still am. My father and his four sisters, they all bet on me as if I was their racehorse and as if my university education was a steeplechase. What do you do in the morning in your kindergarten, Hannah?"

"What a funny question. I do exactly what any other kindergarten teacher does. Last month, at Hanukah, I glued together paper tops and cut out cardboard Maccabees. Sometimes I sweep the dead leaves from the paths in the yard. Sometimes I tinkle on the piano. And I often tell the children stories, from memory, about Indians, islands, travels, submarines. When I was a child I adored the books my brother had by Jules Verne and Fenimore Cooper. I thought that if I wrestled and climbed trees and read boys' books I'd grow up to be a boy. I hated being a girl. I regarded grown-up women with loathing and disgust. Even now I sometimes long to meet a man like Michael Strogoff. Big and strong, but at the same time quiet and reserved. He must be silent, loyal, subdued, but only controlling the spate of his inner energies with an effort. What do you mean? Of course I'm not comparing you to Michael Strogoff. Why on earth should I? Of course not."

Michael said:

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"If we had met as children you would have sent me sprawling. I used to get knocked down by the stronger girls when I was in the lower grades. I was what you'd call a good boy: a bit lethargic, but hard-working, responsible, clean, and very honest. Nowadays I'm not at all lethargic, though."

I told Michael about the twins. I used to wrestle with them furiously. Later on, when I was twelve, I was in love with both of them. I called them Halziz—Halil and Aziz. They were beautiful boys. A pair of strong, obedient seamen from Captain Nemo's crew. They hardly ever spoke. They either kept quiet, or else emitted guttural sounds. They didn't like words. A pair of gray-brown wolves. Alert and white-fanged. Wild and dark. Pirates. What can you know about it, little Michael?

Then Michael told me about his mother:

"My mother died when I was three. I remember her white hands, but I can't remember her face. There are a few photographs, but it's hard to make them out. I was brought up by my father. My father brought me up as a little Jewish socialist, with stories about Hasmonean children, *shtetl* children, children of illegal immigrants, children on kibbutzim. Stories about starving children in India, in the October Revolution in Russia. D'Amicis' *The Heart*. Wounded children saving their towns. Children sharing their last crust. Exploited children, fighting children. My four aunts, my father's sisters, were quite different. A little boy should be clean, work hard, study hard, and get on in the world. A young doctor, helping his country and making a name for himself. A young lawyer, valiantly pleading before British judges, being reported in all the newspapers. On the day that independence was declared, my father changed his name from Ganz to Gonen. I am Michael Ganz. My friends in Holon still call me Ganz. But don't you call me Ganz, Hannah. You must go on calling me Michael."

We passed the wall of Schneller Barracks. Many years ago there was a Syrian orphanage here. The name reminded me of some ancient sadness, the reason for which I could not recall. A distant bell kept ringing from the east. I tried not to count its strokes. Michael and I had our arms round each other. My hand was frozen, Michael's was warm. Michael said jokingly:

"Cold hands, warm heart."

I said:

"My father had warm hands *and* a warm heart. He had a radio and electrical business, but he was a bad businessman. I remember him standing doing the washing-up with my mother's apron round him. Dusting. Beating bedspreads. Expertly making omelettes. Absently blessing the Hanukah lights. Treasuring the remarks of every good-for-nothing. Always trying to please. As if everyone was judging him, and he, exhausted, was forever being forced to do well in some endless examination, to atone for some forgotten shortcoming."

Michael said:

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"The man you marry will have to be a very strong man."

A light drizzle began to fall, and there was a thick gray fog. The buildings looked weightless. In the district of Mekeor Baruch a motorcycle went past us, scattering showers of droplets. Michael was sunken in thought. Outside the gate of my house I stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. He smoothed and dried my forehead. Timidly his lips touched my skin. He called me a cold, beautiful Jerusalemite. I told him I liked him. If I were his wife I would not let him be so thin. In the darkness he seemed frail. Michael smiled. If I were his wife, I said, I would teach him to answer when he was spoken to, instead of just smiling and smiling as if words didn't exist. Michael choked back his resentment, stared at the handrail of the crumbling steps and said:

"I want to marry you. Please don't answer immediately."

Drops of freezing rain began to fall again. I shivered. For an instant I was glad I did not know how old Michael was. Still, it was his fault I was shivering now. I could not invite him up to my room of course, but why couldn't he suggest we go to his place? Twice after we had come out of the cinema Michael had tried to say something, and I had cut him short, saying, "That's trite." What it was that Michael had been trying to say I could not remember. Of course I would let him keep a cat. How peaceful he makes me feel. Why will the man I marry have to be very strong?

A WEEK LATER we went on a visit together to Kibbutz Tirat Yaar in the Jerusalem hills.

Michael had a school friend in Tirat Yaar, a girl from his class who had married a boy from the kibbutz. He begged me to go with him. It meant a lot to him, he said, to introduce me to his old friend.

Michael's friend was tall and lean and acid. With her gray hair and her pursed lips she looked like a wise old man. Two children of uncertain ages huddled in a corner of the room. Something in my face or in my dress made them collapse periodically into bursts of muffled laughter. I felt confused. For two hours Michael engaged in animated conversation with his friend and her husband. I was forgotten after the first three or four polite phrases. I was entertained with lukewarm tea and dry biscuits. For two hours I sat and glowered, fastening and unfastening the catch of Michael's briefcase. What had he brought me here for? Why had I allowed myself to be talked into coming? What sort of a man had I landed myself with? Hard-working, responsible, honest, neat—and utterly boring. And his pathetic jokes. Such a dull man shouldn't be forever trying to be amusing. But Michael did everything he could to be witty and gay. They exchanged boring stories about boring schoolteachers. The private life of a gym teacher called Yehiam Peled reduced Michael and his friend to howls of vicious schoolboy laughter. There then followed an angry argument about a meeting between King Abdullah of Transjordan and Golda Meir on the eve of the War of Independence. Michael's friend's husband thumped on the table, and even Michael raised his voice. When he shouted his voice was frail and tremulous. It was the first time I had seen him in the company of other people. I had been wrong about him.

Afterwards we walked in the dark to the main road. Tirat Yaar was connected to the main Jerusalem road by a lane lined with cypresses. A cruel wind nipped me all over. In the afterglow of sunset the Jerusalem hills seemed to be plotting some mischief. Michael walked beside me, silent. He could not think of a single thing to say to me. We were strangers to each other, he and I. For one strange moment, I remember, I was overcome by a sharp feeling that I was not awake, or that the time was not the present. I'd been through all this before. Or else someone, years before, had warned me against walking in the dark along this black lane next to an evil man. Time was no longer a smooth, even flow. It had become a series of abrupt rushes. It may have been when I was a child. Or in a dream, or a frightening story. All of a sudden I was terrified of the dim figure walking silently beside me. His collar was turned up to hide the lower part of his face. His body was thin as a wraith. The rest of his features were hidden by a black leather student's hat pulled down over his eyes. Who is he? What do you know about him? He's not your brother, no relation at all, not even an old friend, but a strange shadow, far from human habitation, in the dark, late at night. Maybe he's planning to assault you. Maybe he's ill. You have heard nothing about him from anyone responsible. Why doesn't he talk to me? Why is he all wrapped up in his own thoughts? Why has he brought me here? What is he up to? It's night. In the country. I'm alone. He's alone. What if everything he has told me was a deliberate lie? He isn't a student. His name isn't Michael Gonen. He has escaped from an institution. He's dangerous. When did all this happen to me before? Somebody warned me, a long time ago, that this was how it would happen. What are those long-drawn-out sounds in the dark fields? You can't even see the light of the stars through the curtain of cypresses. There is a presence in the orchard. If I scream and

scream, who will hear me? A stranger, walking with fast, clumsy steps, heedless of my pace. I fall back a little, deliberately. He doesn't notice. My teeth are chattering with cold and fear; the winter wind howls and bites. That silhouette doesn't belong to me; it's distant, wrapped up in itself, as if I were just a figment of its thoughts, with no reality of my own. I'm real, Michael. I'm cold. He didn't hear me. Maybe I wasn't speaking aloud.

"I'm cold, and I can't run this fast," I shouted as loud as I could.

Like a man distracted from his thoughts Michael hurled back his reply:

"Not long to go now. We're almost at the bus stop. Be patient."

As soon as he had spoken, he vanished once more into the depths of his great overcoat. A lump rose in my throat, and my eyes filled. I felt insulted. Humiliated. Frightened. I wanted to hold his hand. I only knew his hand. I didn't know him. At all.

The cold wind spoke to the cypresses in a hushed, hostile tongue. There was no happiness in the world. Not in the crumbling pathway, not in the darkling hills around.

"Michael," I said, despairing. "Michael, last week you said you liked the word 'ankle.' Tell me this, for heaven's sake: Do you realize that my shoes are full of water and my ankles hurt as if I were walking barefoot through a field of thorns? Tell me, who's to blame?"

Michael turned round sharply, frighteningly. He glared at me in confusion. Then he put his wet cheek against my face, and pressed his warm lips to my neck like a suckling child. I could feel every bristle on his cheek against the skin of my neck. I enjoyed the feel of the rough cloth of his coat. The cloth was a warm, quiet sigh. He unbuttoned his coat and drew me inside. We were together. I breathed in his smell. He felt very real. So did I. I was not a figment of his thoughts, he was not a fear inside me. We were real. I took in his pent-up panic. I reveled in it. "You're mine," I whispered. "Don't ever be distant," I whispered. My lips touched his forehead and his fingers found the nape of my neck. His touch was cautious and sensitive. Suddenly I was reminded of the spoon in the cafeteria in Terra Sancta, and how it had enjoyed being held in his fingers. If Michael had been an evil man, then surely his fingers, too, would have been evil.

A FORTNIGHT or so before the wedding Michael and I went to see his father and his aunts in Holon, and my mother and my brother's family at Kibbutz Nof Harim.

Michael's father lived in a cramped and gloomy two-room flat in a "Workers' Dwelling" housing project. Our visit coincided with a power failure. Yehezkel Gonen introduced himself to me by the light of a sooty paraffin lamp. He had a cold, and refused to kiss me out of fear I might catch it from him just before my wedding. He was clad in a warm dressing gown, and his face was sallow. He told me he was entrusting a precious burden to my care—his Michael. Then he was embarrassed and regretted what he had said. He tried to pass it off as a joke. Anxiously, shyly, the old man enumerated all the illnesses Michael had had as a child. He lingered only on a very bad fever which had nearly proved fatal to Michael when he was ten. He stressed, finally, that Michael had not been ill since he was fourteen. Despite everything, our Michael, though not one of the strongest, was a decidedly healthy young man.

I recalled that when my father was selling a second-hand radio he used to talk to the customer in the same tones: frankness, fairness, a reserved familiarity, a quiet eagerness to please.

While Yehezkel Gonen addressed me in this tone of courteous helpfulness, with his son he barely exchanged two words. He merely said that he had been amazed to receive his letter, with the news it contained. He regretted that he could not make us some tea or coffee, as the electricity was cut off and he did not have a paraffin stove or even a gas ring. When Tova, God rest her, was alive—Tova was Michael's mother ... if only she could have been with us on this occasion, everything would have been more festive. Tova had been a remarkable woman. He wouldn't talk about her now because he didn't want to mingle sorrow with gladness. One day he would tell me a very sad story.

"What can I offer you instead? Ah, a chocolate."

So, feverishly, as if he had been accused of neglecting his duty, he rummaged in his chest of drawers and produced an ancient box of chocolates, still in its original gift wrapping. "Here you are, my dears, help yourselves. Please.

"I am sorry, I didn't quite catch what it is you are studying at the University. Ah yes, of course, Hebrew literature. I shall remember in future. Under Professor Klausner? Yes, Klausner is a great man, even though he doesn't approve of the Labor Movement. I have a copy somewhere of one of the volumes of his *History of the Second Temple*. I'll find it to show you. In fact, I'd like to give you the book as a gift. It will be more useful to you than to me: Your life is still ahead of you, mine is behind me now. It won't be easy to find it with the electricity not working, but for my daughter-in-law nothing is too much trouble."

While Yehezkel Gonen was bending down, wheezing, to look for the book on the bottom shelf of the bookcase, three of the four aunts arrived. They, too, had been invited to meet me. In the confusion caused by the power failure the aunts had been late, and had not managed to find Aunt Gitta and bring her with them. That was why only the three of them had come. In my honor, and in honor of the occasion, they had taken a taxi all the way from Tel Aviv to Holon so as to be on time. It had been pitch dark all the way.

The aunts turned to me with a slightly exaggerated sympathy, as if they saw through all my schemes but had decided to forgive me. They were delighted to make my acquaintance. Michael had written such nice things about me in his letter. How glad they were to discover for themselves that he had not been exaggerating. Aunt Leah had a friend in Jerusalem, a Mr. Kadishman, who was a cultured and influential man, and at Aunt Leah's request he had already made inquiries about my family. So the aunts, all four of them, knew that I came from a good home.

Aunt Jenia asked if she could have a few words with me in private. "I'm sorry, I know it's not very nice to whisper in company, but there's no need to insist on strict politeness in the family circle, and I suppose from now on you're one of the family."

We went into the other room, and sat down on Yehezkel Gonen's hard bed in the dark. Aunt Jenia switched on a flashlight, as if the two of us were outside alone together at night. With every movement our shadows executed a wild dance on the wall, and the flashlight shook in her hand. I was struck by the grotesque idea that Aunt Jenia was about to ask me to get undressed. Perhaps because Michael had told me that she was a pediatric specialist.

She started in a tone of resolute affection: "Yehezkele's—I mean, Michael's father's financial position is not particularly good. Not at all good, in fact. Yehezkele is a petty clerk. There's no need to explain to a bright girl like you what a petty clerk is. Most of his salary goes on Michael's education. What a burden that is there's no need for me to tell you. And Michael won't give up studying. I must tell you quite clearly, definitely, and unambiguously that the family will on no account consent to his giving up his studies. There's no question of it.

"We discussed the matter on the way here, my sisters and I, in the taxi. We propose making a great effort and giving you, say, five hundred pounds each. Perhaps a bit more or a bit less. Aunt Gittel will certainly contribute too, even though she couldn't manage to be here this evening. No, there's no need to thank us. We are a very familiar family, if you can say that. Very much so. When Michael is professor you can repay us the money, ha ha.

"It doesn't matter. The point is that even with that you won't have enough to set up a home just yet. I find the monstrous rise in prices these days absolutely appalling. Money itself drops in value every day. What I mean to say is, is your decision to get married in March final? Couldn't you put it off for a while? Let me ask another question, perfectly frankly, as one member of the family to another: Has anything happened which would prevent you putting off the date of the wedding? No? Then what's the hurry? I'll have you know that I was engaged for six years, in Kovno, before I married my first husband. Six years! I realize, of course, that in our modern age there's no question of a long engagement, no six years. But what about, say, a year? No? Oh well. But I don't suppose you manage to save very much from your work in the kindergarten? There will be expenses for housekeeping and expenses for studying. You must realize one thing, that financial difficulties at the outset can well ruin a couple's married life. And I'm speaking from experience. Someday I'll tell you a shocking story. Allow me to speak frankly, as a doctor. I admit that for a month, two months, half a year, your sexual life will overcome all other problems. But what will happen after that? You're a bright girl, and I beg you to consider the question rationally. I have heard that your family is living in some kibbutz ... What's that? You inherit three thousand pounds under your father's will on your wedding day. That's good news. Very good news. You see, Hannele, Michael forgot to tell us that in his letter. By and large, our Michael still has his head in the clouds. He may be a scientific genius but when it comes to



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