VINTAGE

MY MICHAEL

AMOS OZ

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About the Book

1950s Jerusalem. Hannah Gonen has just married and is thrilled and pained by her young well-meaning husband, Michael. Haunted by her dreams of two boys who disappeared from Jerusalem after the estalishment of the state of Israel, Hannah gradually withdraws from her husband into a private world of fantasy and supressed desires.

About the Author

Born in Jerusalem in 1939, Amos Oz is the internationally acclaimed author of many novels, essay collections and a semi-autobiographical work, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. He has been translated into over thirty languages, and received several international awards, including the Prix Femina, the Israel Prize and the Frankfurt Peace Prize. He lives in Arad, Israel.

ALSO BY AMOS OZ

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Soumchi

AMOS OZ

My Michael

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY
Nicholas de Lange

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTRODUCTION

Forty Years Later

My novel *My Michael* is written entirely from the point of view of a woman, in the first person. I was about twenty-six years old when I wrote it, and I was certain that I knew everything there was to know about women. Today I would not dare write an entire novel in a female voice.

Following its publication, I received many letters from astonished women who asked me 'How did you know?' I also received many other letters from women who chided me for not knowing anything. I'll never know who was right.

The truth is that I wrote *My Michael* almost under duress – the character of Hannah so overwhelmed me that I began speaking her idiom and dreaming her dreams at night. And it's not that I copied her from a real person. Not at all. She came from wherever she came from, got inside me, and did not let me go. I withstood her for many months and did not write a single line – who am I to write about the love, marriage, and disillusionment of a young woman from Jerusalem who was ten years my senior? But Hannah would not let go of me. She brought with her, into my life, her Michael, her parents and his parents, her son and her neighbours, the whole neighbourhood, her entire Jerusalem, and also the Arab twins of her dreams that turned into my dreams. I was compelled to begin to write the book in order to get rid of her and get back to my life.

My life then was that of a kibbutznik at Hulda who divided his time between teaching and fielding crops, very far from Hannah Gonen, from her failing love, and from her dismal Jerusalem.

I didn't think I would finish writing this book. I thought I would write a few pages about Hannah, maybe a short story, and so break free of her. I wasn't keen on her or her marital woes, and her secret fantasy life was particularly not to my liking.

I began to write the book in 1965, prior to the publication of my first novel, *Elsewhere Perhaps*. At first, I wrote only on Thursdays (that year the kibbutz assigned me one work day a week for my literary experiments). But Hannah quickly forced me to write her story every day of the week. Nily and I and our two daughters then lived in quarters that consisted of one small room and another room half that size next to the kibbutz offices, opposite the bus stop. I would come home in the afternoon, take a shower, and devote the evening to my family. When the girls and Nily went to sleep, I'd sit down and write for two or three hours into the night. Since I had no study, since I was unable to write a single line without a lit cigarette between my fingers, and since Nily could not sleep in a smoky room with a light on, I shut myself up in the tiny bathroom, which was about the size of an aeroplane lavatory. I'd put down the toilet seat, sit on it, and place on my knees a volume of Van Gogh reproductions we'd received as a wedding present. I'd open my notebook on top of the art book, light a cigarette, and write what Hannah dictated to me, until midnight or 1 a.m., when my eyes closed with weariness and sorrow.

When I hear about writers who travel to seek inspiration in ambience-laden places with breathtaking landscapes, I recall how I wrote most of *My Michael* in the toilet (perhaps it's reflected in the book, most of which in fact

takes place in a tiny, cramped, murky Jerusalem apartment with a low ceiling).

I just said that I wrote everything that Hannah dictated to me. But that is not accurate. The truth is that I fought her with all my might. More than once, even more than twice, I heard myself telling her: ‘That doesn’t fit. It’s not your nature. I’m not going to write that.’ And she would scold me: ‘Don’t you tell me what’s in my nature and what isn’t. Just shut up and write.’ I’d insist: ‘I won’t write that for you. I’m very sorry. Go to someone else. Go to a woman. I can’t write such a thing. I’m not a woman, and I’m not a woman author.’ She remained adamant: ‘Write what I tell you and don’t interfere.’ ‘But I’m not your secretary. You’re just a character in my book, not the opposite.’ We’d fight it out at night, she and I. Sometimes I let her have her way and sometimes I absolutely refused to give in. To this day I don’t know if the book would have come out better or worse if I had given in to Hannah more, or less, than I did.

When I finished writing the book, in April 1967, a month before the Six Day War broke out, when I had finally freed myself from slavery to Hannah, I sat down and read it and was overcome with heavy doubts: I had produced a novel where no one got killed and no one was betrayed, a predictable chronicle of a marriage gone sour, of a somewhat hysterical wife, a desolate husband, a nerdy kid, grubby neighbours, and a divided Jerusalem that came out wintery, gloomy, and ominous. Furthermore, six weeks later they were blowing the *shofar* at the Western Wall and the air was full of ‘Jerusalem the Gold,’ which was the opposite of the Jerusalem of Hannah and Michael. Had I not finished writing the book a month before that war, I surely would never have finished it.

I thought to myself: This is a book that will appeal only to a small clutch of sensitive readers willing to make do with a novel that really has no plot, whose heroes are not

heroes, and which takes place in a city, divided Jerusalem, that no longer exists.

With a heavy heart I delivered the manuscript to an editor at the Am Oved publishing house. He read it and told me that, regretfully, the book was not marketable and would not appeal to the readers of his popular People's Library imprint. In fact, he said, it reminded him of a book of poetry – written with sensitivity but not appropriate for the public at large. He offered some ideas for improving the book: for example, he suggested, Hannah should cheat on Michael at least once, or alternatively Michael could turn out to be a scientific genius and win international fame. Or they could both leave Jerusalem and open a new chapter in their lives elsewhere, perhaps at a kibbutz? And maybe it would be best to change the book's title from *My Michael* to *The Hannah Diaries*? And why such an old-fashioned name? Maybe I could call her Noa, or Ruthie? But even if I were to refuse to make such changes in the book, the editor said, Am Oved would deign to publish the novel as it was. He just wanted to give me some food for thought, and to suggest how I might put a little life into my drab story.

For my part, I was elated by the words 'written with sensitivity,' and I agreed with him about the public at large. The publisher intended to issue a very small printing, but because of a mishap with another title *My Michael* ended up coming out in April 1968, almost a year after I submitted it, as part of the People's Library. To the publisher's surprise, so my own surprise, and to the surprise of the handful of close friends who had read the manuscript, *My Michael* turned into a bestseller almost overnight, read by both women and men. Nearly 130,000 copies were sold in Israel and hundreds of thousands of other copies were bought by readers of the 28 languages into which it was translated, in the 72 editions that were issued throughout the world. Maybe it really is true that some books are universal precisely because they are so

provincial and spacious precisely because they are so minimalist. Maybe.

Sometimes I go back and think about Hannah Gonen and her husband Michael in their gloomy apartment, about their dreary, uneventful lives, and I remember Hannah's voice recounting to me, in the toilet at Kibbutz Hulda, the misery of her entrapment, her unslaked longing for far lands, bustling cities, vast panoramas. I see Hannah standing at her window, always looking out over the expanses she could not reach. And I tell her, to myself: Hannah, now you are everywhere, in Japan and Korea and China, in Bulgaria and Finland and Brazil – are things just a bit better? Have a peaceful journey, I tell her. And then I return to what I am writing now, so far, and not so far, from her.

Amos Oz, 2008
Translated by Haim Watzman

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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. 198, 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 defence 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.

Cambridge
November, 1971.

N. de L.

1

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 leant 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 woollen 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 favour. 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 learnt by now to spot a Jerusalemite at first sight. As he spoke he looked into my eyes for the first time. His eyes were grey. 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 was 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 grey mud. And the minerals in the crystals like delicate veins, very fine and brittle. The grey mud split open gradually before our very eyes, because in this instructional film the natural processes were shown 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 around 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, looking 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 windows, as if it was demanding that we listen with rapt attention to some urgent message it had to deliver.

2

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 Café 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 round St. Symeon'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 woollen dress. To him, at least.

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

Michael was wearing a grey overcoat. He did not take it off the whole time we sat in Café 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 wireless operator in the Carmeli Brigade.'

Then he started talking about his father. Michael's father was a widower. He worked in the waterworks 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 towards 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 recognise 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 elder 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 wireless. 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 in 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 working men's club. Running? Arranging benches, filing chits, duplicating notices, picking up cigarette-ends after meetings. It might be nice if our parents could meet.... Oh, he had already said that once. He apologised for repeating himself and boring me. What was I reading at the University? Archaeology?

I told him I lived in digs with an orthodox family in Achvah. 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 Café Atara on a winter's night.

A famous scholar came into the café in the company of two women. Michael leant towards 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 loved to meet 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 wanderer in a strange 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 the 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 organisation. I still remember a curious episode. When we came out of 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 apologised 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 moustache 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 was 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.’

3

TEN O’CLOCK.

Michael and I paid our own bills, 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 towards Zion Square, as if something sensational was happening in the centre 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 light of car headlamps. 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

shorn 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 'precambrian', '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 panel lights glared red in the darkness. Michael spoke like a man weighed down with a grave