

On Love's Misunderstandings

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Today I know that if my mother hadn't died, my husband wouldn't have become newly religious my heart wouldn't have been broken and I wouldn't have become unemployed. But if she hadn't gotten sick with lung cancer and died with a speed that suddenly slowed me, I would never have met him to fall in love with and conceive my first son.

He was a young man who was in my history class. We should have guessed that it would end badly because when we tried to chat with each other during breaks by the wooden picnic table that had somehow found its way there, in a desolate field cloaked in yellow weed and nettles in the middle of the city, misunderstanding immediately arose between us. Maybe it was all the political lingo he used which I didn't comprehend, or the way he tended to go on at length while I tended to keep it short. Anyway, I felt that though his smile was charming, talking with him was hard. I didn't let this feeling sway me, though, for that very afternoon, as I wandered around the Mahaneh Yehuda market with Amit, I told him about my love with infatuated excitement, as he was skipping over a puddle of fish-water, cautiously telling me about married life. Those were hard days of love.

Often, at the height of lovemaking, Yehuda Amihai's line comes to my mind: "We are implements of hard love." I certainly felt that way in those days, when my mother was dying of cancer in our house on Ein Gedi Street, and in the mornings my brother would drive her to radiation treatments, and in the evenings her husband fed her chicken soup from deep bowls, as I wandered the realm between love and devastation, making the trip to teach at the high school in Beit Shemesh, borrowing money from someone for the return trip and in the shared-taxi. On the way to Jerusalem I graded students' papers, their impatience pounding at my head. In the afternoons I went to visit my mother. We sat together on the black leather sofa and I had the feeling that there was something I needed to ask, but I didn't know what it was.

My brother interviewed her for a documentary film he was making, my brother asked her all the questions that she wanted to be asked, while I remained suspended in a state of not-knowing, like a swing with one of its ropes cut. Then I told my mother the tale of my love, I painted her fingernails with the pink polish like she loved, and she smiled her secret smile at me, the smile she had to get sick for it to be revealed.

For a few days, I was excruciatingly slow, like a picture, like a cat that's about to be caught in the jaws of a predatory dog and in the midst of fleeing becomes resigned to its capture and slows its running. I witnessed such a running once, such a capture in burning teeth, the dog's bared fangs and quivering drool. I saw the stray cat's body clutched in the mouth of our dog who was still panting from the chase, and watched him place the little dead animal, its fur streaked with blood, on the sidewalk. Now he licked it a little his eyes glowing with pride. He picked it up in his teeth again, came through the gate and placed it at the doorway to our house, proffering his spoils. He sat down, back erect, expecting my mother to enthusiastically praise him for the successful hunt, but she scolded him with disgust, called my brother to come help her and went to fetch a black plastic bag, a squeegee and a dustpan.

Somehow I was just reminded of that luckless cat, of the friend who quit speaking to me after my dog had caught her grandmother's cat in his teeth; I thought of this misunderstanding between master and dog, when the dog's pride in his prey is a matter of shame and revulsion to his masters, who've stopped feeling any real compassion for the little creatures, for the kittens that multiply so quickly and fill the garbage cans and the yards and insist on hiding amid the dark leaves of the ferns; yet, their dog being so barbaric is awkward for them with the neighbors.

"Maybe you could behave like a human being already?!" my exasperated mother would sometimes chide him, when he eagerly leapt on her as she returned home, nearly toppling her with his weight, or when he scattered all of his food on the floor and insisted on eating from there and not from his dish. And sometimes he really did behave like a human being -- when there was music and we danced, he'd jump up and place two paws on my shoulders and we danced together like that, he and I.

When our dog Guru got old, and could no longer go outside to relieve himself, and abashedly tucked his mouth between his legs, my brother and my mother took him to the vet, who gave him an injection to put him to sleep. I'd just returned from seeing a friend in Netanya. When at the beach I'd forgotten to put on sunscreen lotion, and I came home with my body all burnt by the sun. For Guru's burial we drove to the mountain opposite Herodion, on the way to the Gilo neighborhood, to a patch of brushland. My brother and his friend Amir carried the dead body in a dark blanket, my mother and I followed them. With each step I took, my arms and legs were scratched by the brambles, and my sun-scorched body burned. When Itai and Amir reached the olive tree at the top of the hill, my brother looked questioningly at my mother, ~~and~~ she told him they should stop, that this was the right place to bury him.

When my mother got sick with lung cancer, she walked about the house on feeble legs, her bald pate gleaming, with a growing wisdom and an understanding of death that deepened from day to day. She talked about her impending death to everyone who came to visit her, and divided her belongings among her loved ones, knowing that after her death whatever wasn't distributed now would be left to her husband. She gave me necklaces and earrings and embroidered tablecloths; her books she gave to her friends from the university. Her pal Esther came from Argentina to be with her. Full of consolation and

insight she sat at the kitchen table during the hours of conversation that steadily dwindled. There were friends and relatives who apologized, who came very seldom, timidly walking down the steps to the bedroom, perching gingerly on the edge of the bed for a moment, glancing around at the collection of small mirrors on the wall, at the bathroom concealed by a see-through curtain, repeatedly expressing their concern.

My brother looked after her, his eyes obscured by an old pair of glasses, his fair hair falling to his shoulders and his words tender, like someone coming to terms with loss. His hands gave my mother the medicine and the cup of water, administered the injections. He was the one who took a small Q-tip to moisten her dry lips, he heard her increasingly indistinct muttering and grasped its meaning. Even in her last twilight days, he understood what she meant -- She hadn't intended on dying by indifferent, cruel chance, in hellish pain and in a body that was fading away, with fingernails hard as stones and a withered face.

I remember her lips that were curled into the edges of a smile at the moment of death, when I went down the stairs to her room on that Friday afternoon, after crossing the peaceful white courtyard, hearing the sounds of the birds on the trees and the rustle of the ferns as I walked by, descending the steps and sensing the blazing quiet, and at her bedside sat her husband and her son, and I saw that her body was not moving or breathing, and I sat down to look at her.

I was very quiet, quite dazed, I believe I did not even remember to ask how and when. I think it was a month after her death that my brother, anguished, told me exactly how she died, how he had taken his camera and filmed these death moments, and I couldn't grasp how such a thing was possible -- at the moment of death there is death; how can there be documentation, too? But I also knew that he was devoted to her even at the moment of her death whereas I was avoiding it. Looking through the photo albums during the days of the *shiva*¹ and I showed Shai, whom I loved, my childhood photographs so he'd memorize and remember what I was sure to forget. The relatives and friends who arrived heavy with grief met him, greeted him with a handshake. A classmate, who had been in love with him, comes in, surprised to find him here paging through the picture albums together with my brother, surprised at how quickly he had left her and joined my family. One afternoon I tried to make grape jam according to the recipe that my mother left but it came out all rubbery and tough; inattention, clumsiness -- How presumptuous I was to think that everything is possible. Next morning we drove into Jerusalem's gravelly hills, on the way I had to make then stop the car and ran to the side of the road to be sick; I was four months pregnant. We searched for an apartment to rent in Moshav Ora and Moshav Aminadav, in the one we found a room full of junk in a house with filthy walls, in the other a too spotless, well-kept apartment whose owner had demands we couldn't meet, and on the way back Shai said to me -- This wouldn't happen in my family -- During the *shiva* you stay home, you don't go apartment hunting.

Only after my son was born and I was filled with grief and loneliness in the little house in Moshav Beit Zayit, did I start to write about my mother who had been the source of certainty in my life. For a long time after my childhood, I felt that she knew all my thoughts, and filled with fear, I stopped telling her, in awe of her wisdom. My mother who was sensuous and beautiful, who dared to do and say whatever she wanted, who had divorced my father when she was unhappy and raised us in the house in Talpiyot. Women who wanted to get divorced came to her for advice; she worked as a nursing supervisor for the Health Ministry, and went with girlfriends to demonstrate for a woman's right to have an abortion. She took us to the sea in a rickety car which she kissed when it got us there safely.

My parents moved with us kids to a house they had been able to buy in Old Talpiyot with the money given them by the ultra-Orthodox yeshiva next door for the house they lived in on Rashi Street. My brother and I were three and four years old, and in the summer we splashed in a plastic pool in the yard, we had a small dog which barked a lot, and in the eyes of our devout neighbors, this was all very bad. They gave my parents three times the value of the house, just so they'd leave. With boxes and furniture, bags and suitcases, we arrived at the apartment in the asymmetrical building built in the time of the Turks. In the new place there was a kitchen and two big, high-ceilinged rooms. My father constructed a wooden loft for them to use as a bedroom, and my mother painted the window frames and doors blue. But they would fight and berate each other over absolutely everything; my grandmother who came to look after us muttered to herself that it was hopeless; then one day a friend who talked with my mother advised her to get a divorce, it wasn't necessary to live like this.

I remember my father's back as he left the house, bending to exit through the blue iron gate, lugging two suitcases and his red typewriter. He moved from one small studio to the other, renting them for a month or two each time; then to fleabag apart-hotels, and to a cramped room beneath a building stairwell, where he put mattresses on the floor so we could sleep. With a sad laugh kept us away from the places that children should stay away from. I remember the sketch of the Chinese dragon he hung on the wall, and the feeling of temporariness that enchanted but also frightened us.

After my mother died we went once to see him and his wife, Yona, and while we sat on the light-colored sofas, my father blurted out something he'd intended to say a long time before: When your mother was young she tried to commit suicide and I saved her. Is that how he said it? Is that what he meant? Or did he mean to say that she survived the suicide attempt, and had she not met him, fallen in love with him and married him, she would have sunk once more into a bleak depression. In one of their wedding photographs she is descending a staircase alongside my father, her face beaming; my father holds her arm with an embarrassed, lost look on his face as she gazes the opposite way, gazing at the man who'd enthralled her. This is apparently the doctor, with whom she was in love when she was a nurse at Hadassah Ein Karem Hospital, but he loved and dumped many women, and she, who'd only just begun to speak Hebrew freely, suddenly fell into a gloomy muteness. Perhaps it was her roommates in the dorms who found her and saved her from death, took care of her until she met my father, a meeting whose circumstances are unknown to me.

I never knew the facts for certain, and perhaps my mother tried to keep these things from me. I glanced at my brother sitting there on the sofa holding a glass of juice, and from the look in his eyes I saw that he knew about this suicide attempt. I was surprised, but I didn't show my father. When we got back home I asked Shai – What do you think of my family? We speak offhandedly of life and death, I just happen to learn a month after my mother died that she had wanted to kill herself when she was young. "With us it's just the opposite," he said. "We don't talk about the hard stuff."

Does it matter what you know and what you don't? Do we need to know what really happened to the people we love? I was a girl who denied facts, who went off to read books when the news programs reported on wars and peace agreements. I don't have faith in things until they've already happened, I used to say. But my mother fell in love with and married a man who repulsed me, and I went on closing myself in my room. They sat down at the black table to sketch outlines for renovations, and I didn't come to take a look. I don't understand that sort of thing, I said. But then the walls were knocked down, the floor was covered with deep dust and I didn't have a room to sleep in, I went to friends' houses. Then I remembered things my mother told me about her childhood, about her father who had lost all his assets after her mother died, and how, being impoverished, they moved into the kitchen of her elder sister's house. Her dancing gowns were given to her by her girlfriends, and they always did up her hair for her. How would my mother ever have been able to genuinely love if not for her girlfriends? Her father was always silent and her mother was buried in the soil of Paraguay. Then she took her few clothes and boarded the ship for Eretz-Yisrael.

¹ *shiva* – in Judaism, the formal seven-day mourning period following the death of a close relative.