

A Boy, a Girl and the Sea by Richelle Shem-Tov

On the Carmel coast, tucked in between Caesarea and Maagan Michael, is an Arab fishing village – Jisr az-Zarqa. Between Jisr and the mountain is the moshav of Beit Hananya.

My family and I are spending this August afternoon with my sister and her family at their home on the moshav. The men have taken the children to the beach. My sister is taking a nap. Feeling restless and despite the heat, I decide to go for a walk.

The sun ignores my hat and dark glasses and beats down relentlessly, but Beethoven, my sister's dog and I are on our way. There's not another living soul about and except for the buzzing of insects and the call of the muezzin from the Arab village, hardly a sound - not even the barking of dogs or the chirping of birds. All have crept into the shade to await the cooler evening hours.

My walk takes us along the paved sidewalks between the shaded gardens of the moshav homes - this is the older and more charming part of Beit Hananya. The houses, some old and some new, have mostly red tiled roofs with large gardens and grounds that were once used for farming. A country village: leafy and green with many-coloured bougainvillea, parks, a store, and a community centre.

We go further, onto a gravel path leading into the fields at the edge of the moshav. I look around me. I see an assembly, a patchwork - the moshav, the kibbutz, the aqueduct, the mountain with its rock-covered crown turning pink in the afternoon sun. I see the greens and browns of both cultivated and untended fields. I see the Arab village which hides the sea. It's an Israeli/Palestinian mosaic. In Hebrew, a "psifas."

Behind me to the south is Beit Hananya. Bordering the moshav to the north are the overgrown remains of an ancient Roman aqueduct, part of a two-thousand-year-old structure which brought water to the ancient Herodian city of Caesarea.

And north of that, beyond the arches of the aqueduct, are the banana fields of Kibbutz Maagan Michael. Here my sister and I were born and brought up. It is still a lovely settlement, green and shaded, with lawns and gardens. I remember the fish ponds, cotton fields and cucumber fields. As a tiny child, I ran away from the children's home to look for my father in these fields. I remember our small two-bedroomed but comfortable home, full of books; I remember the cowshed, the swimming pool, the river, the spring where we ate watermelons chilled by the icy water; the bird sanctuary, the nursery schools I attended, the school which served and still serves many of the children in neighbouring villages - our villages; I remember many happy childhood experiences with fun and friends; I remember the sea.

To the east is the beginning of the Carmel Mountain range which stretches northward to Haifa and beyond. I have always loved this rugged mountain, an ever-present background to our lives and homes on the Carmel coast.

I look to the west between me and the sea. In the distance I see Jisr, the Arab village, spiked here and there by minarets calling their worshippers to prayer. It is separated from the moshav by the road and a few kilometers of untended fields; also by a cultural, religious, economic, language and historical barrier of insurmountable dimensions.

Jisr is the only remaining Arab fishing village on the coast of Israel and one of the poorest and most neglected in the country. Yet it does have a certain charm – a village on the sea: a sea breeze; children splashing in the water; fishing boats; food and coffee stalls; people spilling onto the streets as evening sets in.

Jisr az-Zarqa means "Bridge on the Blue," referring to the blue stream or the Tanninim river which empties into the sea north of Jisr. The river and the nature reserve around it serve as a welcome park for this dry and space-deprived population, as it does for us all.

Beyond the village is the Mediterranean Sea. I envy the sea its coolness on this hot August day.

My mind goes back twenty years – a time when I was still in high school. It happened during the summer holidays, on a day not unlike today. I was fifteen then, blossoming into my teens. My friends and I were on the beach, the beach adjoining Maagan Michael, ‘our beach’.

I loved the sea, and was a strong swimmer. I swam out, out-swimming my companions. Then suddenly I felt that familiar but stronger-than-usual current tugging at me; daring me; pulling me ever deeper. I knew these currents well, but this time it seemed to be more determined. The shore moved further and further away. I fought the sea and swam with all the strength I could muster but was powerless – the currents were frightening – I began to panic. Perhaps it was only a few minutes. It felt like a lifetime.

Then he came: a brown boy with green eyes who spoke Hebrew with an accent, an Arab accent. He came in a fishing boat with an older, bearded man. They lifted me out of the water. It took a little while for me to catch my breath and know I was safe. They spoke kindly and gave me water to drink. They turned their boat and sailed northwards towards ‘our’ beach.

I looked at the boy, perhaps my age, perhaps a little older. He wore faded trunks; his body was lean and muscular. His eyes seemed to reflect something of the colour of the sea. He looked at me, and my heart skipped a beat. I felt a strange warmth. They, he and his father, were fishermen from Jisr.

As we neared the shore, two life guards from the Kibbutz came towards us on surfboards and took me from the boat with hardly a word to the fishermen. They seemed angry. I called out a thank-you. The fishermen on the boat had probably saved my life.

I saw the boy again. One afternoon, about a week later, I was at a beach in Caesarea near the Roman aqueduct, a continuation of that same aqueduct near the moshav. I was sitting with family. I took my four-year-old cousin to play at the water’s edge. She ran gleefully, away from where we were sitting, further up the beach. I ran with her. We lay in the shallow waters, reveling in the wet cool of the ripples.

There were Arab families sitting further back, in the shade of the aqueduct. The boy was there. He must have seen me, for he came and sat near us. He played with the child; we jumped in and out of the water which cooled our sun-heated bodies. We made a sand castle. We laughed in play. We spoke. He told me he had just finished school. That he was a smart pupil and hoped one day to become a teacher, but he first needed to find work to help support his family. He would also go out to sea to bring in fish with the village fishermen. We spoke of the sea and the mountain. He thought we could perhaps climb it together one afternoon – he knew it well as he’d often gone up to work with an uncle in the gardens of Zichron Yaakov. I liked the idea. I too had often walked up with family and friends. I told him of us, my family, my grandfather who spoke to me of his childhood years in Iraq where he had been at school with Muslim children, many of whom were his friends; that his family had lived in harmony in a mixed neighbourhood.

The few featherlike clouds on the western horizon were turning pink; soon the sun would set. It was time for me and my cousin to return for our picnic supper on the beach with the family.

The boy’s father came toward us, beckoned to his son and spoke to him angrily. They left soon after.

That evening my parents asked me about the boy, and I told of all that had taken place since that day in the sea.

They looked stern and sad. “Such a friendship is not possible,” they told me, and said I was not to see him again. This from my parents who were outspoken defendants of the Palestinian cause, of human rights. Of course I was old enough to have some knowledge of the situation in our common land but resented their reaction.

I asked my grandfather, and he too looked sad. “You have friends, family and a whole world here open to you. The boy is of another world which you cannot enter.”

“But you said they were your friends.”

“That was another place and another time," he said.

I saw the boy one more time, again on the beach. He caught my eye but turned away and disappeared with his friends. It hurt.

Sometimes I would allow myself to dream, to imagine us climbing over brush and rocky terrain into the mountain. I could see us looking down on the stunning view below. A multicoloured ‘psifas’ of fields, forests, fishponds, villages, towns – theirs and ours. And beyond all this, the blue sea. In my dreams I could see the evening sun as it set.

I envy now as I envied then the sea for its coolness; I envy the waves that break on the rocks or gently lap at the shores of Maagan Michael, of Jisr, of Caesarea. I envy the sea that we loved.

There were other friends, other boys - our boys. There was school, army, work, travel abroad, and studies. I became a journalist and married a man in the city where we have our home and family.

Most often a sea breeze gives some relief on these hot summer days, but not today. No call yet from the muezzin – the silence is broken only by the buzzing of the insects.

I turn and start back with the dog, towards my sister’s cool air-conditioned home. She must be wondering where I am. The family will soon be home from the beach for supper.

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