

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT:



Still Loving Jerusalem

CONVERSATIONS WITH MY
PALESTINIAN AND ISRAELI FRIENDS

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Old City Café with Old Friend

THE NEXT DAY, I arrived a little early at the Jaffa Gate in excited anticipation of my lunch with Halil. Inside the gate, under the domed ceiling, about seven Palestinian teenage girls wearing black *hijabs* and *khadors* were sitting on the ground in the shade, giggling and talking in rapid Arabic.

Pedestrians rushed past them through the gate and out into the bright sunshine of the Old City plaza, right before the Arab *shuk*. Tourists clustered together outside a tourist center, waiting for their Old City walking tours to start.

I scanned the crowds, but Halil was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, I was struck by the painful thought that he might not show up. How naïve of me to think that Halil would think of me as a valued old friend he wanted to see again after so long—me, a Jewish American woman he'd had a brief affair with many years ago. I decided I'd give Halil ten minutes before I left.

Since there was no one to talk to, I silently spoke to God, "Please don't let me play the fool as I have done so often in the past, with my naïve, youthful thinking.

This idealistic sense of the world was more tolerable when I was younger, but I'm simply getting too old for it now."

Just then, I saw him walking briskly toward me from the middle of the crowd, right on time. His eyes sparkled when he spotted me, and his face broke into a wide smile.

"Hello, Anat! Have you been waiting long?" he asked, taking my hand in both of his.

"No, no. It's good to see you!"

"Come, let's go to my friend's restaurant. It's nearby."

We entered the *shuk*, dense with Palestinian merchants and tour groups. To our left and right, merchants warmly greeted Halil, and he greeted them back as we walked down the crowded passageways.

"You know so many people here."

Halil laughed easily. "I'm from here. This is my home."

"But you've been living in England for so long."

"It doesn't matter how long I've been gone. This is my home. Everyone here knows my family and me."

We turned left on Via Dolorosa and walked into a small café. We sat at one of the little white plastic tables in the front, right off the street, and ordered two Turkish coffees. A young Palestinian man served us from a

tray that held a copper Turkish coffee pot with a long handle and two little cups.

We talked about Halil's life in England and how he'd met his girlfriend, Jody, in Israel not long after I last saw him, all those years ago. She'd been a young, single British tourist, and Halil had gone back with her to England. They'd had a daughter together, Kathy, who was disabled but getting the best care possible. He told me how both of them had stayed home on alternate shifts to care for her.

"I love my daughter so much," he said. I was getting used to Halil's crisp British accent and perfect English grammar.

"What type of disability does Kathy have?" I asked.

"I don't know the word in English. But she can't walk or talk."

"How old is she?" I asked.

"Thirteen."

I looked down in advertently, but Halil continued, "She can't walk or talk, but she recognizes me as her father, like a baby does. She smiles and laughs when she sees me. I love her so much. I miss her already."

"You've become such a devoted father."

"Jody and I never actually got married," Halil said, after the young man came back with a tray of more

little cups of fresh coffee. "And now we are separated since I wanted to come back to Israel. Ah, I missed being home so much." Halil took out a cigarette. "Do you mind?"

"No, we're outside."

He lit up and exhaled the smoke away from me. In the United States, smoking anywhere, even outside, would have bothered me, but here so many people still smoked, I just had to get used to it.

"That must have been hard, being away so long."

"It was. But now Jody and I are considering reuniting because we both love our daughter so much and we want to care for her together. It's hard for Jody to take care of her alone. So tell me about yourself, your husband, your daughter, your parents."

"Well, my husband, Don, is from Bulgaria, and he's a wonderful guy. He's a test-engineer and works as a contractor at Microsoft. We got married when Shoshana was almost five."

He laughed good-naturedly. "Shoshana? This is an Israeli name."

"Yes. I spent so much time here, I decided to give her a Hebrew name."

"Wonderful, wonderful, Anat. It is a beautiful name."

"Being a single mother for almost five years made me finally grow up." We both laughed.

"It must have been hard."

"Yes, but being an older solo parent is easier, I think. I had my education behind me, and I had a way to make a living. Having Shoshi was the best decision I made in my life, by far."

"And your parents, how are they?" he asked.

"My father died four years ago."

"Oh, I am so sorry, Anat." He reached across the table to take my hand.

"Thank you. But my mother is still alive."

"Wonderful. How old is she?"

"She's eighty-six and still living in the big house she raised us in. We are always visiting her and taking her places."

Halil had never met my parents, yet I appreciated that he seemed truly interested in them, as he was in my husband and daughter. We returned to talking about his return to Israel after being gone so long.

"I feel conflicted, since I want to be here in Jerusalem and in Beit Safafa where my family's home is and where everyone knows me. But I want to be with my daughter too."

"Does Jody want to come to Israel to be with you?"

Halil's sparkling eyes turned down as he sipped his coffee. "No, that's the problem. She wants to stay in Britain. She tells me she can't live here. It's just too different for her. But I have a Jewish Israeli lawyer working with me to help me get my Israeli ID, so then I can travel back and forth between England and Israel," he said, sounding hopeful.

Tourists walked past our little outside table at the café on their way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Can't you travel to England without an Israeli ID?"

"No, Anat. I can't leave Israel without it. If I did, I wouldn't be able to come back to Israel again from England."

"I just don't understand why it's so difficult for you to travel wherever you want." I was thinking how easy it is for me, as an American, to travel anywhere in the world, as long as I can afford it.

"These are the rules, Anat," he said with a laugh shadowed by sadness.

"Is it okay with you to have a Jewish lawyer working on your case?" I asked cautiously.

Halil laughed lightly. "I don't care what religion a person is. Now that I have been living in England, I see how silly all these problems are between people here.

Anyway, my lawyer is looking into this matter and doing what he can to help me. He's a good person."

Later, at the village, I asked Lev about Halil's case, and learned that all Palestinian residents over the age of sixteen who have legal permanent residence status, including noncitizens in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, need Israeli IDs in order to have a valid Israeli passport, among many other rights.

When I asked Lev about the chances of an Israeli lawyer helping Halil, Lev told me what I didn't want to hear. He told me, "Listen, I know some good, hard-working Israeli lawyers who tried to help Palestinians get Israeli IDs, but they were usually not successful."

The burly restaurant owner arrived in a big hurry, and he and Halil greeted each other and spoke in Arabic for a bit.

As we waited for our food, Halil told me, "After we are done with lunch, I will go pray at the little mosque I go to just down the street from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."

"Okay, good." After a slight pause, I added, "You used to be so proud of being nonreligious. I remember how happy you were to be drinking from that bottle of Israeli beer in Kikar Zion, since your father wouldn't allow you to drink it at home."

I pictured the Halil of my memories, slender and muscular, with spirals of black curls cascading around his youthful face as he leaned back to drink from his beer bottle, triumphantly rebelling against his religious Muslim parents.

Halil laughed robustly. "And now I pray five times a day, just like my father."

Involuntarily, my memories flitted to the bedroom where I had been staying in Old Katamon, Halil and I lying in bed, his curls winding around my fingers, as I noticed the muscle definition of his abs. Then, how the cab outside was waiting for him to take him back to his neighborhood.

I sternly ordered myself to stop thinking about all that. But I realized those memories had no hold on me other than recognizing how things used to be when we were younger.

"Do you still drink beer?" I asked.

"No, no," he laughed again, clicking the tip of his tongue.

"You seem so mature now, and religious. You seem happy too. You're like a different person," I said.

"Really, luv? Like a different person?"

"Yes, absolutely. Before you were so angry all the time, and you seemed to be holding it all inside. You

kept telling me ‘Nothing bothers me anymore,’ but I knew things bothered you a lot. Now, you’re easygoing, and you seem at peace, even though you have your share of difficulties.”

“Well, yes. When you knew me, I was a young man. Now look at me.” He pointed to his big belly and laughed.

The restaurant owner arrived with a big silver tray of food, heartily commanding us to eat. We carefully ripped pieces of soft pita and dug them into the swirled hummus and eggplant spreads.

A group of Chinese tourists walked past us down Via Dolorosa, wearing sun hats with visors and neck flaps and carrying expensive-looking cameras, their tour leader leading the way.

“They just came from the church,” Halil said, referring to the Holy Sepulchre.

Several of the tourists glanced at us, and for a few seconds, I saw Halil and myself at the little Arabic café from their point of view. We must have looked like part of the local scene. Olive-complexioned, especially after being in the sun, I could easily be mistaken for a local.

We ate our salad, hummus, and eggplant as the sun grew even hotter. Luckily, we were sitting in a shaded area.

“You are right, Anat, that I am happier and more easy-going now, like you said. I got used to living in a country that doesn’t treat me like I am somebody who is less than others. Now I know that it doesn’t matter what someone’s religion is. In England, I got used to this way of life, where we all lived side by side without thinking of someone as less than someone else,” he told me in a relaxed manner.

“You got used to living in a pluralistic society, where people from different backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs live peacefully in the same country.”

Halil didn’t know the word “pluralistic,” so I explained the meaning to him.

“Yes, yes, that’s right,” he agreed. “So now I realize how silly all this is in Israel—all these divisions and all this anger. I have gotten used to being equal like my neighbors, and so I have no anger in me anymore. I just need to go through all this bureaucracy to get my ID so I can visit my daughter. I already miss her.”

Prayers

WHEN WE FINISHED eating, we strolled down the Via Dolorosa with the tourists, turned left, then stood facing each other in front of the Holy Sepulchre.

"I wish I could spend more time with you, but I must go pray now." Halil nodded toward the small stone steps at the end of the narrow road. He took my hand in both of his. "Anat, I wish you and your family health and happiness. And I wish your mother health and happiness. God bless her, and God bless you."

Taken a little aback by all his sincere blessings, I only managed to stammer out that I wished the same for him and his family too.

"Do you have an email address so we can keep in touch? Perhaps share photos of our families?" I asked.

"No, Anat," he said with a smile. "I don't have a computer, only this address and the phone number you called me at." He was still clasping my hand with both of his.

Saying good-bye felt so final. Who knew if I would ever see him again?

"God bless you, luv. God bless you and your family," he repeated.

"Yes, you too, Halil. It was wonderful seeing you again."

He let go of my hand and quickly turned to walk down the crowded narrow road and up the shallow stone steps toward his little mosque. Within seconds, he was gone.

As I stood there looking after my old friend as he disappeared among the pedestrians, loneliness engulfed me. Turning toward the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, I watched people enter the open doors. I had been inside the famous church many times. Since I didn't have anywhere else to go at the moment, I wandered once again into the cavernous, dark chambers.

The fragrance of some exotic, musky incense—myrrh or frankincense—filled the inner chamber. One of the clergy members, dressed in a long black robe, chanted rhythmically while walking slowly past me in a wide circle. As he walked, he swung a long silver canister from side to side, with incense smoke wafting out.

I walked past the long line of people waiting to enter the small inner chamber. According to the Christian Orthodox, this was where Jesus had been buried before his ascension. I had been inside before on prior trips when there were no lines, so I found a wooden bench in a dark little alcove against a wall and settled in to watch everyone waiting in line.

After awhile, instead of just watching people, I decided to try to pray. I prayed for healing for my girlfriend's mother in Seattle, who was dying of lung cancer. I prayed for the health of my own mother, who had a serious heart condition and high blood pressure, and for the

continued good health of my daughter and husband. I prayed for my close friends at home, for my Palestinian and Jewish friends in Israel, and while I was at it, for people who were suffering in other countries throughout the world.

Watching the long line of people in front of me patiently waiting their turn to enter the sacred inner chamber, I thought about the Yiddish proverb that tells us we should be compassionate to everyone because we don't know what hidden packs, meaning suffering, each person carries. The more I prayed, the better I felt, and my loneliness started melting away as I saw myself as part of something much larger than I could understand, but didn't need to understand.

While I was praying, it occurred to me that Halil was also praying at the same time in his little mosque up the street, and so I felt connected to him again.

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