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Hard Love

A play in two acts

By

Motti Lerner

Translated from the Hebrew by Anthony Berris

©

English language premier produced by Theater Or in Durham North Carolina,
produced by Diane Gilboa, directed by Jeffery West, May 2005

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The characters:

Zvi: A 40 year-old secular author who was born in the ultra-Orthodox Me'ah She'arim quarter of Jerusalem and turned his back on religion when he was nineteen.

Hannah: A 37 year-old ultra-Orthodox woman who is married to a rabbi 35 years her senior. She is Zvi's ex-wife. Even in her modest ultra-Orthodox dress she is very good looking.

Hannah and Zvi were born in Jerusalem's Me'ah She'arim quarter to families from the ultra-Orthodox community. They married twenty years ago and divorced only ten months later when Zvi became an atheist.

The set:

The first act takes place in the middle of winter in the living room of Hannah's small apartment in Me'ah She'arim. A table and four chairs stand in the center of an old dark rug. The table is covered with a tablecloth on which stands a bowl with a few apples, a jug of water and two glasses. Along the back wall there is a bookcase and next to it an old, black dial telephone. On the left wall there is an open window. The door is in the right wall. The second act takes place in early spring in the living room of Zvi's apartment in Tel Aviv, which will be described later.

The scenes:

Division of the two acts into scenes is for orientation only. The time frames between the scenes are short and can be marked by lighting changes and musical interludes.

Act One

Scene One

A winter's evening. It is raining outside. Hannah's apartment. As the lighting comes up the living room is empty. The doorbell suddenly rings deafeningly. Enter Hannah, hurries to the door and opens it. Enter Zvi wearing a jacket and raincoat. His coat is soaked. He takes it off. They stand facing one another. Both are very tense. She avoids looking at him.

Zvi: It's me.

Hannah: Yes, I know.

Zvi: I'm late. I...

Hannah: It's all right. Give me your coat.

She extends her hand to take the coat as he holds out his hand to shake hands. She avoids shaking his hand and takes the coat. As she does so she invites him in.

Hannah: Come in. Sit down.

Zvi: *(Remains standing)* I forgot to bring a yarmulke.

Hannah: That's all right.

Zvi: Actually, I didn't forget. I couldn't find one. I don't even know if I've still got one.

Hannah: You really don't need one.

Zvi: I wanted to bring you some flowers too. When the taxi dropped me I went to Fishman's shop but it was closed. That's why I'm late. Does he still go to study Talmud in the evening?

Hannah: Yes. Thank God.

She has hung his coat up on the coat tree. He scrutinizes her closely. She still lowers her eyes.

Zvi: I'm really sorry. I didn't want to come without some flowers. I even went into Buchbinder's to buy a yarmulke. But he recognized me and wouldn't sell me one... *(Stops)*

Hannah: Sit down.

Zvi: (*Hesitantly*) Isn't your husband home?

Hannah: He's in the kitchen.

Zvi: The kitchen?

Hannah: Yes.

Zvi: Is he still ostracizing me too?

Hannah: Heaven forbid.

Zvi: He'll soon come in and I'm without a yarmulke.

Hannah: (*Takes a yarmulke from a drawer, puts it on the table*) Here.

He takes the yarmulke but hesitates to put it on his head. The yarmulke is a serious threat to him

Zvi: Are you sure I have to?

Hannah: No, you don't. (*He tries to hand it to her, but she won't take it, so he puts the yarmulke on the table. She takes it and puts it back on the sideboard*)
Sit down. (*He remains standing*) A cup of tea?

Zvi: No, thank you. When I passed the yeshiva I covered my head with my coat. I was afraid that somebody would call me in. Just then I saw my sister Esther but she didn't recognize me because of the coat. If she had, I would have had to go to her place and eat her *kugel*. (*Laughs*) You look... You haven't changed a bit.

Hannah: Thank you.

Zvi: I imagine I look different to you in clothes like these. Without side-locks, without a beard. (*She does not reply*) At first it was even hard for me to get used to myself in the mirror.

Hannah: Would you like a glass of water?

Zvi: But you really haven't... It's as if twenty years haven't gone by.

Hannah: Thank you. Sit down already.

Zvi: I should have been in Paris today. My new book is coming out there.
“Lost Souls” Have you read it? *(She remains silent)* When I got your letter I told them right away that I. *(Stops)* Tell me, don’t you want to see what I look like? God won’t strike you with a thunderbolt.

Hannah: Please do sit down.

Zvi: Look at me, Hannah, you were my wife. It’s not such a terrible sin.

Hannah: Sit down. Please. Sit down!

Zvi: I look at you and it all comes back. Nothing has faded. *(Sniffs)* Even the smells.

Hannah: Please, Herschel.

Zvi: I don’t know how we can have a serious talk like this. *(She remains silent. He looks out of the window)* By the way, doesn’t it bother you that they peek in here from all the balconies?

Hannah: I’ve got nothing to hide, thank God.

Zvi: They’ve been following me since I got out of the taxi. *(Looks outside)*
There’s another one. He’s pretending to help his wife bring in the washing.
(Closes the window) They won’t leave me alone until I come back to live here.

Hannah: *(Almost shouting)* Would you please sit down? *(He sits down. A brief pause)* I’m sure you know what I wanted to talk to you about.

Zvi: I hope so.

Hannah: My husband has grown very frail these past few months. He’s not as young as he used to be. He asked me...

Zvi: Do me a favor, Hannah. I can’t talk to you if you won’t look at me.

Hannah: My husband asked me to speak to you because he...

Zvi: (*Interrupts her*) He asked you to speak to me to save himself the disgrace of facing me. In his eyes I'm worse than an idolater. I'm not sure if you know this, but when they expelled me from here, he sent the students from his yeshiva after me. You didn't know? They chased me with sticks as far as Jaffa Road. (*Regrets*) I'm sorry. I really didn't want to get into all that. (*But cannot control himself*) Three years ago his sons threatened to kill me if I called you just one more time.

Hannah: That's not what I wanted to talk to you about.

Zvi: Maybe he asked you to talk to me because he's afraid that heresy is contagious?

Hannah: He's not afraid.

Zvi: Are you? (*She does not reply*) He's so afraid he's willing to leave us here alone.

Hannah: We can be alone in a room when the door is open and other people are in the house.

Zvi: That's an interesting innovation. In all my years at the yeshiva I never heard of a dispensation like that.

Hannah: You've apparently managed to forget it. (*Impatiently*) He's not feeling well, that's all. (*Silence*) He thinks I know you well enough to have some influence over you.

Zvi: Isn't he afraid that I know *you* well enough to influence you?

Hannah: I want you to stop right there! I don't want to hear that kind of talk. That's why I didn't want to speak to you all these years. That's why I threw your letters away. And don't call me any more. And stop sending me birthday

cards. And don't look for me at weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. And don't ask about me at.

Zvi: So why did you ask me here? Maybe I shouldn't have come. Maybe I should just get up and go.

Hannah: I asked you here to talk about your son.

Zvi: Go ahead.

Hannah: Two months ago he showed up at your nephew Fischel's wedding, started harassing my daughter Rivka'leh in the hallway, and since then he hasn't stopped bothering her.

Zvi: I wasn't there when they met, but I'm sure he didn't harass her.

Hannah: He hardly ever came here before the wedding. Now all of a sudden he's started visiting your father every evening. Suddenly he's walking in the street just as she's on her way home from the school.

Zvi: *(Smiling)* I used to wait for you at the gate.

Hannah: Herschel!

Zvi: Zvi.

In her anger she opens the window.

Zvi: He's nineteen years old. I can't keep track of him all the time.

Hannah: I don't want him anywhere near her. I don't want him hanging around the school waiting for her. I don't want him walking her home. I don't want him writing or calling her. You know all about the influence my husband and his sons have in the yeshivas. You wouldn't want them dropping hints that he's harassing her.

Zvi: Excuse me? He's not harassing her. He met her by chance and they fell in love.

Hannah: They won't marry, d'you hear? They won't marry. There isn't a rabbi who'll dare to marry them. If I have to I'll go into hiding with her. I'll hide her from him under ground. *(The telephone rings. She lifts the receiver angrily and slams it down without answering. Silence)*

Scene Two

Hannah is now sitting down, her head in her hands. Her eyes are still lowered. Zvi takes a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and prepares to light it.

Hannah: Please don't smoke here.

Zvi puts the cigarette back in the pack.

Zvi: What's your husband doing there in the kitchen?

Hannah: Having a cup of tea.

Zvi: Tea?

Hannah: Yes.

Zvi: Can he hear us?

Hannah: Yes.

Zvi: *(Doesn't believe her)* He's seventy-two.

Hannah: He can hear.

Zvi: And where's Rivka'leh?

Hannah: At my mother's. She'll be home soon.

Zvi: Does she know I'm here?

Hannah: She doesn't want him. She's told him a thousand times to leave her alone.

Zvi: I'm quite surprised to hear it. He told me quite the opposite.

Hannah: (*Interrupts him*) He's not one of us. She's not one of you. Matching them is impossible. We've already had a few offers of marriage for her. She'll be eighteen next year. She'll complete her studies at school and get married.

Zvi: We made a pretty good match, Hannah, and if they're anything like us, then they too.

Hannah: (*Interrupts him*) We weren't a good match and they won't be either. For exactly the same reason.

Zvi: What reason?

Hannah: You know very well.

Zvi: What reason? (*She remains silent*) What reason?

Hannah: (*Hesitantly*) You didn't have enough faith.

Zvi: I didn't have enough faith because of you.

Hannah: Because of me?

Zvi: Don't you remember? The day after the wedding I discovered exactly how faith ruins love. When I woke up in the morning and saw you awakening at my side, the last thing I wanted to do was wash my hands.

Hannah: Herschel, stop it.

Zvi: On the days you were forbidden to me I couldn't stand during prayers for fear that all the other yeshiva students could see what I was thinking.

Hannah: Don't blame me, Herschel. You'd lost your faith a long time before our wedding. You told me yourself that you had doubts even before your Bar Mitzvah. When your mother, may she rest in peace, passed away.

Zvi: I had doubts because of her, but I lost my faith because of you. When I saw you following in her footsteps. When I saw you blindly becoming enslaved to Him.

Hannah: I didn't follow in her footsteps. I struggled for my faith.

Zvi: You struggled until you lost me.

Hannah: I didn't lose you. You gave me up for some kind of "free thinking" I don't understand to this day.

Zvi: I gave you up? It was you who asked for a divorce. Even at the rabbinical court I refused to give in to you. Even when your parents sent those thugs after me. Only when I realized that you'd known about it, that you'd known and kept quiet, only then I understood that. *(Stops)* that you preferred Him to me. *(She remains silent)* I've never given you up, Hannah. Even at that terrible time when you blamed me for...

Hannah: I don't want to talk about it.

Zvi: When you blamed me for the death of our baby.

Hannah: I never blamed you.

Zvi: You never blamed me? When I came to visit you in the hospital you wouldn't let me in. "It's all your fault" you said. "It's because of your heresy." You'd have left me even if the child had lived. When I came home from the cemetery your mother had already changed our lock.

Hannah: I didn't blame you. All I said was that he didn't die by chance, that there's cause and effect.

Zvi: That's all? *(She remains silent)* Look at me a moment, Hannah.

Hannah: My husband can hear you, Herschel.

Zvi: That's all you said?

Hannah: I also said that we had to pray for mercy. (*He remains silent*) Today I'm certainly not sure that we always know what is the cause and what is the effect.

Zvi: So your God no longer kills a baby in its mother's womb because its father has stopped praying to Him?

Hannah: (*Painfully*) I was seventeen.

Zvi: I visit his grave every year, Hannah. Every year, on the 10th of July.

Silence. He doubts the sincerity of her "forgiveness". He pours some water into the glass. .

Zvi: Do you want a drink? (*She does not reply. He takes a sip from the glass. She plays with some hair that protrudes from under her kerchief. Now he notices that her head is not shaven. He is surprised*) I see that you don't really observe the business about the hair. (*She doesn't reply*) Rivka'leh has hair like yours, hasn't she? Eran told me.

Hannah: He hasn't seen her hair. She braids it.

Zvi: You unbraided your hair for me before the wedding too, remember? In that room behind the hall at the circumcision of your sister's eldest son. Maybe that's why God punished us.

Hannah: (*Angrily*) I visit the child's grave every year too. On the 14th of Tammuz!¹

He is stunned. He did not know this. He gets up and closes the window. Instead of going back to his chair he moves to her.

Zvi: If I'd known I would have waited for you at the cemetery. I could have walked back part of the way with you. (*Tries to take her hand*)

Hannah: (*Evades him. She gets up and opens the window*) Please don't touch me!

¹ The 4th month of the Jewish calendar

Zvi: Why didn't you tell one of my sisters? Or my sister-in-law? We could have at least talked for a couple of minutes each year.

Hannah: God in heaven, Herschel, I'm a married woman!

Zvi: I know. I also know that you're thirty-seven years old and your husband is seventy-two.

Hannah: He's my husband.

Zvi: Does he fulfill his duties as a husband?

Hannah: (*Angrily*) That's none of your business!

She moves away from him. Zvi goes back to the table and sits down. A moment later he takes an apple from the bowl. He toys with it for a moment and puts it back. Then he takes a cigarette from the pack, puts it between his lips, but changes his mind and returns it to the pack.

Scene Three

They are in their places. They are both trying to be more reasonable

Hannah: It can't go on like this, Herschel. It will end with another tragedy. You were born here, at least. He knows nothing about her. Her world is alien to him. Its rules are foreign to him. Rivka'leh observes all the laws. They'll have had enough of each other after a month of quarrels over going to the *mikveh*². They'll fight over modest dress. Keeping *kosher*³. Observing the Sabbath.

Zvi: Have you seen Eran? Do you know that he's studying music at the academy? He's a violin prodigy. They deferred his army service so he can finish his studies.

Hannah: Rivka'leh won't listen to music that isn't a prayer.

² The Jewish ritual bath.

³ Observance of the Jewish dietary laws.

Zvi: She's already heard him. One day she was walking down the street by herself. He followed her in a taxi and played to her through the window.

Hannah: No he didn't.

Zvi: He didn't make it up.

Hannah: It's a waste, Herschel. A waste of his life and a waste of his art. She will always see it as a sin. He'll spend his whole life hating her for that. They won't have a single day of harmony.

Zvi: Well, I think they can be happy together, Hannah. Over the past few weeks Eran has been in a state of ecstasy. Rivka'leh too. By the way, his art isn't a sin. I don't recall ever finding a written prohibition on music anywhere.

Hannah: It's not only the music.

Zvi: These prohibitions are just customs.

Hannah: She was born here, she grew up here and she'll live here according to our customs.

Zvi: But if you force her to give up Eran she'll hate you for the rest of your life.

Hannah: Maybe she'll thank me for the rest of my life.

Zvi: Are you so sure?

Hannah: Look, in your world everything is permitted. Why can't he find himself another woman?

Zvi: Because he loves her. He loves her very much.

Hannah: You're willing to sacrifice your son's life just to get back at me, aren't you?

Zvi: (*Amazed*) Get back at you? For what?

Hannah: Because I've managed to keep my faith.

Zvi: Faith in what? Who is there to have faith in? (*She does not reply*) All I'm saying is that we should give them a chance, that's all. Maybe they can enjoy a little of what we were robbed of. I respect your devoutness, Hannah, but you're insisting on keeping them apart because of customs that have nothing to do with the Torah⁴ and the commandments.

Hannah: (*After a brief silence*) Why are you torturing me like this?

Zvi: I'm not. I'm simply saying that if they can be happy, then perhaps we can be.

Hannah: (*Angrily*) I am happy! And I didn't ask for a divorce. I didn't want to divorce you when you lost your faith. Or even when our baby was born dead. We got divorced because you wanted to run away from here. You wanted it the day after our wedding. For a whole year you sang the praises of free thinking and in the end you got it.

Zvi: Without you!

Hannah: And I didn't know that my parents sent people after you. When you saw me at the rabbinic court you turned your back on me. That's why I didn't speak to you. You're blaming me for the divorce because you were never happy there. Because you were a stranger there, because they saw you as a stranger, because all your life you've attacked and insulted us in your books just to prove that you're one of them.

Zvi: Have you read my books?

⁴ The Pentateuch; the Law of Moses.

Hannah: You blame me because you've never had the courage to ask our forgiveness and come back. Even though you wanted to. Despite the death of our child. You wanted to come back and to believe. And I know you wanted to. That's why you write about faith all the time.

Zvi: I write about doubt, not faith.

Hannah: I'm sure that all your dreams are set in these streets to this day.

Zvi: I wanted to come back to you. Not to these streets.

Hannah: You blame me because you were weak. Because you weren't steadfast, because you were always looking for an easier way of living.

Zvi: I wasn't looking for an easier way. I was looking for a truer way. From the day I started praying I never felt that anyone up there was listening to me. What should I have done? Bang my head against the wall? And what was I supposed to do after the child died. What? *(She remains silent)* Are you really happy? Answer me. Are you really happy?

Hannah: Yes. And Rivka'leh is happy too.

Zvi: *(Whispers)* May I close the door for a moment? *(Gets up and goes to the kitchen door)*

Hannah: No. *(She intercepts him and won't let him pass.)*

Zvi: I can't talk to you when he can hear every word.

Hannah: Sit down!

Zvi: Hannah, I want to hear the truth.

Hannah: I'm telling you the truth.

Zvi: You're only telling me what you want him to hear.

Hannah: I have nothing to hide from him.

Zvi: *(Gives up, but closes the window)* The truth is that you don't look happy.

Hannah: I'm very happy. I've never had a single moment of regret. Not one.

Zvi: *(Looks at her for a moment)* I want to know exactly what he's hearing.
(He moves towards the kitchen. Hannah blocks his way. He grasps her hand. She shakes it off and moves away) I haven't seen you for twenty years, Hannah, but I can imagine how you've been living. Like my mother, God rest her soul. Forty years in forty square meters. A kitchen. A bathroom. A living room that's also a bedroom. One bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. The shutters always closed. Once a day she hung her washing outside. Once a day she went to the market. Once a month to the *Mikveh*. On Yom Kippur⁵ she went to the synagogue. Never read a book, never listened to the radio. Every now and then she pretended to read the psalms. She never had faith, neither in God nor his rabbis. She cooked, cleaned, did the laundry and kept quiet. The pinnacle of her spirituality was the *gefillte* fish she made for the Sabbath. She never dared to think of herself for a moment. At night I heard her tossing and turning and cursing my father. Her own father. The neighbors. The floor. The walls. God. Today I'm not at all surprised that she hung herself in the bathroom. She had no choice. She had no way out of here.

Hannah: Your mother was a sick woman, Herschel.

Zvi: She wasn't sick, just the opposite. She was healthier than most of us. She was the only one who dared to admit that life here is unbearable. You're carrying on with that life and you're planning the same kind of life for Rivka'leh.

⁵ The Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar.

Hannah: You don't know anything about my life, and certainly not about the life I want for Rivka'leh.

Zvi: There's no love like hers and Eran's in the life you want for her.

Hannah: She loves me and her father. She will love the Almighty, blessed be He, all her life. When she marries, with God's help, she will love her husband and she will be happy in her faith and her family. Your mother, God rest her soul, lost her faith because your father, may he live long, didn't know how to help her strengthen herself, how to help her to...

Zvi: (*Interrupts her*) Rivka'leh loves Eran, Hannah. She loves him just like you loved me. You never had a love like that after me.

Hannah: How do you know what I had?

Zvi: Because I never had a love like that after you. I went from one woman to another. None of them measured up to you.

Hannah: Stop it! I don't want to hear about your women. Rivka'leh will love her husband and her husband will love her. I want you to keep your son away from her, that's all.

Zvi: And I want you to tell me if you've been happy all these years!

Hannah: It's none of your business. You lost the right to know the moment you left. And if you think you can squeeze an answer out of me because I need help, you're mistaken. I don't want your help any more. You're not the man I married and not even the man I divorced. You've not only changed your name, you've become as evil as the world you live in. As evil as the people in your books. I want you to leave. I've nothing more to say.

Zvi: *(Now he is angry too)* You think you can tell me to come and I'll come, and then tell me to go and I'll go? You can't play with me like that. I've tried to reach you for twenty years, to talk to you, to understand you, understand what happened to us, to heal this wound. And for twenty years you've rejected me. I haven't come all this way just to pull your chestnuts out of the fire.

He takes off his jacket and hangs it over the back of the chair. He takes a cigarette from the pack and lights it but immediately regrets and extinguishes it. She gets up and opens the window.

Scene Four

She goes back to the table and sits down. Now she looks at him for the first time.

Hannah: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lost my temper like that. *(Gestures towards the apples)* I bought them this morning at Frankel's. I remembered how you always liked his apples. *(He remains silent)* You're unhappy. I can see it. Rivka'leh told me that you and your wife haven't been so happy over the past few years.

Zvi: It will be all over in a week or two.

Hannah: I hope you'll get over it, with God's help.

Zvi: Perhaps with the lawyers' help. Things have been quite difficult. I haven't been able to write recently. For two years I've been trying to write a biographical novel about my poor mother, and I haven't even managed a single chapter.

Hannah: I don't think you should lose hope.

Zvi: I'm not. I write a few lines every day. As soon as I get the divorce I'll come back to my father's for a few months.

Hannah: You'll live here?

Zvi: Until I finish the book. Maybe he'll be able to tell me something about her that I don't know. I can remember everything better here. From every alleyway there's the smell of her clothes. Her spices. Her cooking. My wife certainly wouldn't follow me here.

Hannah: You can't blame your wife. You were born here. She was born there. If our children get married they'll suffer just like the two of you.

Zvi: I married her because she got pregnant. After what we'd been through I didn't have the strength to lose another child. *(Painfully)* I curse the day I let you stay here. I should have dragged you away from here by force.

She remains silent. He suddenly gets up and goes into the kitchen without her being able to stop him.

Hannah: *(After him)* Herschel!

She is embarrassed. A long moment later he returns.

Zvi: He's not here.

Hannah: He's in the hospital.

Zvi: Does he know I'm here?

Hannah: Yes.

Zvi: I don't believe you.

Hannah: He knows.

Zvi: What's the matter with him?

Hannah: He's having tests.

Zvi: I don't understand. You're allowed to lie to me just because I'm not wearing a yarmulke? *(She remains silent)* Why? *(She remains silent)* Did you have to imagine he was there so you wouldn't say anything forbidden? *(She remains silent)* Why did you lie to me?

Hannah: So you wouldn't say anything forbidden.

Zvi: Me? What am I forbidden to say?

Hannah: We know who you are. We've heard about you and the women in your books. I didn't want you to talk to me the way you write.

Zvi: Look, you were the inspiration for most of those women.

Hannah: Me?

Zvi: Which other young woman did I know here? Only you. You're Leah in "Virgins", Fruma in "Awe and Love". You're also Bracha in "Lost Souls".

Hannah: That's not true.

Zvi: I've known you since you were a girl, Hannah. I saw you growing up. I saw you peering out of this world. I saw you falling in love. I saw you discovering desire.

Hannah: God in heaven! I told you my husband was in the other room so that you wouldn't say things like that. So you wouldn't make all kinds of insinuations. So you wouldn't...

Zvi: (*Seizing the opportunity*) Is that what you thought would happen?

Hannah: That's exactly what happened.

Zvi: Perhaps it's what you wanted to happen.

Hannah: Have you lost your mind?

Zvi: Then why did you ask me here just when your husband's in the hospital and Rivka'leh's at your mother's? Why? Don't be afraid of the truth, Hannah. You knew I was about to get a divorce. So why did you want to see me alone?

Hannah: (*Very angrily*) I asked you here to tell you to keep your son away from my daughter. I couldn't wait any longer. That's why I was even prepared to meet you alone.

Zvi: I'm not saying you set a trap for me, Hannah. I'm saying that you still haven't given up our love either.

Hannah: Stop it.

Zvi: Please Hannah. These signs are no coincidence.

Hannah: Stop it. Please.

Zvi: You're ignoring them because you won't admit you still want me.

Hannah: (*Shrieks*) Stop it!

Her shriek frightens Zvi and he falls silent. She pours herself a glass of water and mumbles the blessing: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, by whose word all things exist". She drains the glass, pours another, drinks it and mumbles a final blessing: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates many living beings with their wants, for all the means thou hast created wherewith to sustain the life of each of them. Blessed is he who is the life of all worlds. Amen" Suddenly she turns her back on him and then runs offstage. Zvi takes the yarmulke from the sideboard, feels it and puts it on his head.

Scene Five

The telephone rings. Zvi tears off the yarmulke and looks at the telephone. Hannah enters hurriedly and lifts the receiver.

Hannah: Hello... Hello? (*She has missed the call*) I'm sorry I asked you here. I'm even sorrier that you interpreted my invitation the way you did. I had no improper thoughts whatsoever. (*Silence. He looks at her. She lowers her eyes*)

Zvi: Well I'm still glad you asked me. (*Silence*) There's something I've wanted to tell you for the past twenty years. The year we were married was the most beautiful year of my life. Despite the tragedy. Despite the arguments.

You, whose entire education was the nonsense they teach young virgins at the girls college, you fought heresy the way a great scholar fights Spinoza.

Hannah: Thank you.

Zvi: In the end you decided to stay here. But I have never believed your decision was irreversible.

Hannah: You're wrong, Herschel.

Zvi: No, I don't think I am. I can imagine the kind of life you've had for all these years with a husband who was forced on you. I know that if I were to come back here, and if I were to regain my faith, it would perhaps be easier for you. But I'd still like us to try. Your husband isn't going to live forever. Perhaps we can still find a way to renew our relationship.

Hannah laughs.

Hannah: You don't know anything about my life.

Zvi: What don't I know?

Hannah: My husband knew why we got divorced. He also knew how much I loved you. He figured that I had doubts like you. But he was not afraid, neither of the doubts nor the love. On the contrary, he helped me to live with the doubt and to fight it. At night, when he came home from the yeshiva he helped me to learn: the *Mishnah*⁶, the *Talmud*⁷, the Commentaries. We'd discuss them through the night until Rivka'leh woke up.

Zvi: (*Amazed*) He taught you? He discussed it with you?

⁶ The collection of oral laws which forms the basis of the *Talmud*.

⁷ The commentaries on the *Mishnah*.

Hannah: My life is very different from the life your mother had. When Rivka'leh went to school he'd stay at home with me in the mornings. We'd lock the door, close the shutters and study. Maimonides, the *Shulchan Aruch*⁸, the writings of the Hasidim. Yes, even Spinoza. He knew that someone seeking faith has to go through heresy and overcome it.

Zvi: Spinoza? He dared to bring Spinoza into this house?

Hannah: He dared far more than all the people who just talk about daring.

Zvi: I don't believe you. You'd have studied Spinoza with me. Not with him.

Hannah: Now leave, even if you don't believe me. Your coat.

Zvi: *(Does not take the coat)* You just studied with him and the great love for me faded?

Hannah: I'm sorry our meeting has to end like this. I don't think we'll be seeing one another again.

Zvi: *(Does not give up)* And what happened to the doubts you had, Hannah? How did they vanish? Anybody who studies, his doubts deepen.

Hannah: You should know better than that, Herschel. Doubts never vanish. He taught me to have patience, to endure doubt until I found certainty. That kind of patience you've never had. *(A brief pause)* Now I want you to go, Herschel.

Zvi: And what about my books? Haven't you tried reading them? Did you never want to know what I'd done? What I thought? What I'd gone through?

Hannah: Please, go.

⁸ A Jewish law book

Zvi: I very much hoped you'd read them. (*She indicates the way out*) I wrote about us, Hannah. About our childhood, our adolescence, our love. In "Lost Soul" I wrote about our tragedy. I hoped that in some miraculous way we could talk through that book. That you'd finally stop blaming me.

Hannah: We've got nothing to talk about.

Zvi: So how do you know that I wrote about those wanton women? Who told you? Your husband? Has he read my books? Who would dare talk to you about books apart from him?

Hannah: I haven't read them. Please, Herschel! (*Again shows him the door*)

Zvi: So how do you know what they're about? How?

Hannah: We have people here whose job it is to read your books and warn us against them.

Zvi: And you accept their judgment as if it were the Ten Commandments?

Hannah: Please go!

Zvi: Don't you have a mind of your own?

Hannah: (*Angrily*) You can smell filth without wallowing in it. Your books are just foolishness. A collection of distorted childhood memories, idle gossip, tales of market women, nothing that's true, nothing. If there was heresy in them, we would read them and argue with them, but there's nothing in them. Nothing. Only a lost soul could write like that. Someone who's gone astray. Someone for whom nothing is sacred. Nothing. Neither our Father in heaven nor his believers on earth. Only a weak man. A man with no integrity, who runs away from every difficulty, every commitment, every responsibility. A man who has run away all his life. From God. From

himself. From people. Only run away! You've always run away! Run away!

After a long moment of silence, Zvi goes to the telephone and dials.

Zvi: If you don't mind, I'll call a taxi. *(Dials. Hears the engaged tone. Redials. Engaged again. He hangs up)* I never ran away. Not from where I wanted to be and not from people I wanted to live with. And certainly not from myself. *(Dials again and hangs up)* I don't believe a word you said! You've read all my books! Every last one of them! You've read them and lamented your life! *(Dials again and hangs up)* I didn't run away! I made a choice! And I paid a very heavy price for it. In orphanhood. In loneliness. Without a father. Without a rabbi. Without God. Without you. For years I kept away from synagogues so I wouldn't be tempted to go inside. I didn't even glance at the Talmud. I didn't open Maimonides. I didn't say a word of prayer lest I should suddenly hear someone up there answering me. But not for a single moment have I regretted the day I got up and renounced my faith. There's nobody there to answer!! *(He falls silent)* I'll find a taxi in the street.

He takes his coat and exits, leaving the door open. She hesitates for a moment. Now she regrets throwing him out. She opens the window and looks to see him in the street. He suddenly comes back. She does not hear him come in. He stands looking at her. After a moment she sees him and closes the window.

Zvi: I didn't run away. I saved my life. You've wasted yours. Because of your fear of that crazy God of yours you submitted to that gang of zealots and gave up all the dreams you had. You, who could have studied anything you wanted, remained a little narrow-minded woman, frustrated and scared, studying at night behind closed shutters. I'm not blind, Hannah. Since I left you've never loved anyone and no one has loved you. Even

through those awful clothes I can see your body. I can see how hungry you are for love.

Hannah: I want you to stop.

Zvi: Every night was a nightmare for you. You paced back and forth like a madwoman in this wretched cage. Just like my mother. I don't believe that books were enough for you.

Hannah: They were more than enough.

Zvi: The day you married your husband he was already old and sick. I saw a hospital bed and an oxygen cylinder in his room. For twenty years he's carried the stench of death. You're not yet thirty-seven. I can see you sitting here alone at night, listening to his coughing from the next room, his spitting and groaning, and you'd curse him. You'd curse him and God.

Hannah: I asked you to stop!

Zvi: *(Ignores her)* And I'll tell you something else. Over all the years they exploited and humiliated you, you were waiting for me. You missed me. You wanted me. You thought that by blaming me for the death of our child you'd learn to hate me. You only succeeded in hurting me. That dead child kept us together. At night you'd hide in the bathroom and read my books. You looked for signs of our love on every page. Your desire never faded. You want me even now.

Hannah: That's not true!

Zvi: Even more than you wanted me twenty years ago.

She raises her hand and slaps him, but immediately embraces and kisses him. She stops the kiss, looks at him for a moment. They kiss again. He takes off his jacket. They slowly lower themselves to the floor. The telephone rings. They ignore it. After five rings, it stops. The lights fade to black.

Scene Six

It is now “after the act”. They are sitting at the table, unable to look at each other. After a while he looks at her and sees how tormented she is.

Zvi: *(Hesitantly)* I think it would be better if I left. We both need time to think.

(She remains silent) Rivka’leh will probably be home soon. *(She remains silent)* I’ll come back and talk to you in the morning. I think that... *(He takes his coat and turns to leave)*

Hannah: Wait. Don’t go. *(He hesitates)* You can’t leave now. *(He remains standing)* Sit down. *(He sits down next to her)* I’ve been waiting for you for twenty years, and I didn’t know I was waiting. I didn’t know for what. *(Silence)* If only I’d waited until my husband died. It looks like I really have lost my mind. Everything I’ve been taught, everything I’ve taught myself was all in vain. I wish I were dead. *(Her voice chokes. It seems to her that he wants to leave)* No. Don’t go.

Zvi: I’m not going.

Hannah: How can I live if you go.

Zvi: I’m not leaving. *(Silence)* You don’t have to wait until your husband dies, Hannah. I’m not going back on what I said. If you want... if you’re prepared...

Hannah: *(Interrupts him)* I want to live with you. I want to. But how? In adultery? There’s a God in heaven.

Zvi: You can ask for a divorce.

Hannah: But after our divorce I remarried and I can’t ever marry you again. Even if I do get another divorce. Even if, God forbid, I’m widowed.

Zvi: So we’ll live together without getting married. If you’re not married to another man, it’s not such a terrible sin.

Hannah: It's still a sin.

Zvi: Our marriage was never ended, Hannah. We both know that despite the divorce we weren't divorced. We can't run away from ourselves any longer.

She sinks into thought. For a moment this solution seems quite reasonable and she is prepared to consider it. But the thought of asking for a divorce is difficult for her

Hannah: I've lived with him for over twenty years. What can I tell him? How can I face him? How can I explain? He'll never forgive me. Nobody will forgive me.

Zvi: If you stay here to ask for forgiveness, Hannah, you're committing suicide.

Hannah: I have my truth. I have my faith. I can't just throw away the life I've lived here like an old dress.

She remains silent. He goes on.

Zvi: Tel Aviv isn't a desolate place. Life there isn't sublime, perhaps, but it's pretty human. At least we'll have a chance to focus on ourselves, on our needs, to struggle for our joy. *(She remains silent)* I love you, Hannah'leh. And you love me. We could have been so happy together all these damned years.

Hannah: Hannah'leh. I'd forgotten I used to be Hannah'leh. *(She chokes up)*

Zvi takes her hand. He embraces her again. She breaks away.

Hannah: God in heaven! The man who has supported me for so long, who taught me, who loved me unconditionally, who raised a daughter with me, is lying in the hospital, hardly able to breathe, and I'll come along and ask him for a divorce? How can I even think about it? And if he won't sign right away I'll come to you without a divorce? Some things are punishable by death. Either way I'll be living in sin all my life. If you love me, you

have to give me the strength to wait until I'm permitted to you, until I repent for what I've done, until I'm forgiven. I can't behave like the people in your books, Herschel. Yes, I've read them. All of them. I can't leave a sick man all alone.

Zvi: I'm not asking you to abandon a sick man. You can go on looking after him. But if you go on being his wife, you'll be sinning against yourself. You'll be betraying yourself.

Hannah: Here sin is determined by divine law, Herschel, not by the needs of human beings.

Zvi: And you'll go on living here even if your divine law forbids us to live together? (*Silence*) We're not separating again, Hannah. This is our last chance. This time I'm not going to let you go.

Now she sees another possibility of them living together

Hannah: What will happen if you stay and live here? At least we'll be able to go on seeing each other. My husband won't live much longer. Then it'll be easier for us. Perhaps we can still find a way. Maybe we'll still be able to get permission to marry. I'm sure the rabbis will help us. Meanwhile we'll try and atone for what we've done. After all we've both sinned.

Zvi: I'll live here?

Hannah: Why not? You've never really detached yourself from us. You've written about us. You've missed us. You can still go back to religion. Your family's here. They'll all welcome you back with open arms.

Zvi: Me? Go back to religion? Me, who's run away from God all his life? The God who's persecuted me all my life? Me, who wakes up in a panic every

night for fear that the sky might be falling on me and I will have to fall on my knees and beg Him for mercy?

Hannah: You've loved me your whole life, Herschel. You said yourself that our marriage hasn't ended. We can live together here. Here we can mend.

Zvi: It's out of the question, Hannah. I'm not staying here. It would be a death sentence for me. I won't give Him the satisfaction. We're leaving right now, Hannah. We're not waiting a moment longer. In every corner here there's another trap waiting. We'll spend the night in a hotel and tomorrow we'll rent an apartment.

Hannah: Herschel, wait a minute.

Zvi: I'm not waiting any longer. I won't willingly put my head on the guillotine and you won't put yours on it either. By the time my mother discovered that she'd wasted her life, it was too late. It was too late for her to escape.

Hannah: I can't escape either, Herschel.

Zvi: Of course you can. We'll live in Tel Aviv, fearlessly, free. We'll have another child. We'll call him David, just like we wanted to name our baby.

Hannah: I'm telling you that I can't go with you.

Zvi: We'll raise him together. And together we'll teach him how to live. You can go to university. Why not? We'll write together. And we'll argue day and night. At home. In the street. In cafés. And the child will sit in his stroller with us in the cafés, and he'll get ice cream all over his face. And we'll take him to the beach with us. And you'll wear a swimsuit and swim in the sea. Come on. Pack a bag.

Hannah: That's the life you've planned for me? Such a worthless life?

Zvi: It's not worthless, Hannah.

Hannah: I'm not sure I want it.

Zvi: You don't have a choice now.

Hannah: What do you mean by that?

Zvi: How can you live here now? Open your eyes. Who'll forgive you? Who'll forgive me? Can you live here without forgiveness? They'll beat you to death first.

Hannah: *(Stunned)* You knew. You knew all along. That's why you seduced me.

Zvi: I seduced you?

Hannah: Yes. So I'd have no choice. You planned it so I'd have to escape. So I'd have to hide with you. That's why you came.

Zvi: I came to save you.

Hannah: By committing adultery? In one night I've lost my place in this world and the world to come. *(Angrily)* You didn't come here to save me. You came for vengeance. To ruin my life. You came to take me away from my daughter, from my husband. From the Almighty. That's why you sent your son to seduce her. You sent him. You talked him into it. No. I don't want to hear another word! Not a word! Out! Before the earth opens up and swallows us both! Go!

He hesitates for a moment and then exits hurriedly. She locks the door after him and bursts into tears. A moment later she sees Zvi's coat on the chair. She takes it. The telephone rings. She hesitates, puts down the coat and answers the telephone.

Hannah: Hello?... Yes, speaking. What is it?... You can tell me... What's happened?

She listens to the bad news and nods her head as she hears the condolences that follow. The stage is gradually darkened.

End of Act One

Act Two

Scene Seven

The second act takes place about two and a half months after the first. It is a clear spring day. The living room of a second-floor Tel Aviv apartment. This is Zvi's new apartment where he has lived since he left his wife. In the room there is a light colored rug, curtains, well-upholstered easy chairs and a couch, a bookcase, a sideboard, pictures on the walls, a laptop, a TV set, etc. A window faces the sea. The room is in a state of total disorder. Suitcases and cartons stand in a corner. Books and clothes are spread around them on the floor. As the light comes up there is no one in the room. The soft sound of a musical doorbell is heard. Nobody answers it. A moment later the door opens. Enter Hannah. She is dressed in the clothes of an ultra-Orthodox woman from Me'ah She'arim but more colorfully than in Act One. Now, too, her dress suits her, her head is covered with a close-fitting kerchief and she is wearing matching earrings, which she was not wearing at the last meeting. She appears more radiant than at the meeting in Act One. Over her arm she is carrying Zvi's coat that he left at her apartment. She looks around, examining his world. Zvi, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, comes in from the hall, drying his hair with a towel. He sees her and is stunned. They stand looking at one another. He was not expecting this visit.

Hannah: You forgot your coat.

Zvi: Thank you. You could have left it with my father. *(Takes the coat and puts it down on one of the chairs)*

Hannah: I hoped you'd still be able to wear it in the winter. But spring came early this year. How are you?

Zvi: I'm fine, thanks. How are you?

Hannah: Well, thank God. It's nice here.

Zvi: How did you find this apartment?

Hannah: I came by taxi.

Zvi: Have you ever been to Tel Aviv?

Hannah: No. *(Glances out of the window)*

Zvi: That's the sea.

Hannah: I imagined it was. May I sit down?

Zvi: Of course. (*Brushes the couch with his hand*) Cat's hair. I hope you're not allergic. (*He removes a bra and panties from the couch and hides them casually*)

Hannah: No.

Zvi: She sometimes sleeps here. The cat. Something to drink? Water? Tea? Coffee? I've got some disposable cups.

Hannah: (*Shakes her head*) No, thank you.

Zvi: I'm sorry about the mess. (*He cleans up some things*) I only moved in a week ago.

Hannah: (*Hesitantly*) I assume she's not at home. Is she?

Zvi: The cat?

Hannah: The girl you're living with. She's at work. Isn't she?

Zvi: Dana? Yes. She probably is.

Hannah: (*Puzzled*) Dana? Like "Dan"?

Zvi: It's quite a common name here.

Hannah: She's younger than you just as I was younger than my late husband, may he rest in peace.

Zvi: Is that what Eran told you? She's twenty-three and she's got pretty good taste in literature. She likes my books. I don't feel that her age is a problem. (*She remains silent*) By the way, I owe you an apology about your husband's funeral. I've been so busy lately.

Hannah: His passing was a blessed relief for all of us. For him too.

Zvi: I wanted to come to the *shiva*⁹, but the divorce got complicated and.

⁹ The seven-day period of mourning after the death of a close relative.

Hannah: (*Silence. She hesitates*) I imagine you don't know what I want to talk to you about.

Zvi: I imagine I do. The rumors have even reached here.

Hannah: Rumors? What rumors? Nobody's heard a thing...

Zvi: (*Interrupts her*) If Eran has something to say to me, he can come and talk to me himself. Why doesn't he call? Why doesn't he answer my calls? Has he ostracized me?

Hannah: No, he hasn't ostracized you. On the contrary, he hopes that I can reconcile the two of you.

Zvi: He asked you to do it?

Hannah: That's not what I came to talk to you about, Herschel. I wanted to...

Zvi: I can't understand the rush. A wedding? So soon? He's only nineteen. They hardly know each other.

Hannah: They know each other quite well. They've been meeting at my apartment almost every day for the past two months.

Zvi: You can tell me the truth, Hannah. I know they've also been meeting other places besides your apartment. When she visited the hospital they got together in the supply closet. I doubt they spent the whole night "debating".

Hannah: She's not pregnant.

Zvi: So why the panic? Two and half months ago you fought like a tiger to keep them apart. Anyway, you're in mourning. Can't the wedding wait until next year? It's suicide.

Hannah: Suicide, Herschel?

Zvi: (*Loudly*) Zvi!

Hannah: All right. Zvi. Let's leave the matter of the children for a moment, Zvi. I thought that perhaps...

Zvi: You've used his love for Rivka'leh to trap him. You probably even threatened that if he didn't become religious you wouldn't let him see her again.

Hannah: I didn't threaten him.

Zvi: And when you saw you couldn't keep them apart you decided that the best thing would be to turn him into one of you. I know your methods. You invited him for a talk, then you suggested he take part in a lesson at the yeshiva, then that he should observe the Sabbath, put on Tefilin¹⁰, go to the *mikveh*. Only two and a half months and you've managed to rob me of my son.

He goes through his pockets looking for a cigarette and is disappointed to find only an empty pack

Hannah: Two and a half months ago you wanted to rob me of my daughter.

Zvi: *(As he searches for cigarettes)* I didn't tempt her, coax her or blackmail her into anything. *(To himself)* Dammit! Where has she hidden my cigarettes?

Hannah: He doesn't think I've blackmailed him.

Zvi: He doesn't think because his love for Rivka'leh has blinded him. Because you've taken control of his mind. They did it to me when I was a kid, and I still haven't managed to free myself. It's true. You were right. To this day all my dreams take place in your street.

Hannah: Eran is an independent young man and it's impossible to control his mind.

¹⁰ Phylacteries

Zvi: So now you no longer think that I talked him into seducing her?

Hannah: No.

Zvi: That's my punishment for allowing him to see her. (*Angrily slams the last drawer shut*) I can't understand your stubbornness. You've had quite a few matches for her. She's the daughter of the head of a yeshiva. She's got a dowry. You could have got her the finest husband in Jerusalem. What do you see in Eran? He was born of a woman who never went to the *mikveh* in her life. He doesn't speak Yiddish. He smokes drugs. Cocaine. He's got a tattoo on his back. He's slept with half the girls at the academy. He's unstable. Just as quickly as he's become a believer, he can turn around and abandon religion. A decent Orthodox family wouldn't even consider him as a match.

Hannah: Eran is a wonderful boy, Zvi. He's undergone a vast change. That's why there's so much anger in him. It will pass. Once he feels surer of himself he'll accept you just as you are.

Zvi: Do you know what he said to me? All of a sudden I'm not a good father. All of a sudden I'm an egotist. I don't care about anything except my books. By the way, and make no mistake about this, he hasn't had any sudden revelation. He's digging his heels in about marrying Rivka'leh just because I told him I disagreed. Give him a year. If he still wants to marry her, I won't stand in their way.

Hannah: Fine. I'll think about it. Let's talk about something else for a minute.

Zvi: What's the big rush? I want to know what the big rush is.

Hannah: They're in love and want to get married.

Zvi: Since when do you see love as a good reason? She slept with him and you're demanding that he marries her.

Hannah: No. She didn't.

Zvi: If she consented, then he doesn't have to marry her.

Hannah: She hasn't slept with him.

Zvi: And now you're worried that after what they've done, it will be hard for you to find her another husband.

Hannah: She doesn't want another husband.

Zvi: (*Angrily*) My son's life is a very high price to pay for your daughter's drop in value on the bride market.

Hannah: Do you really think I'm offering my daughter for sale on the market, Zvi? That their love has no value for me?

Zvi: They will not get married! (*Continues his search for cigarettes*) Damn it to hell! She decides I have to stop smoking so she throws out all my cigarettes. (*Picks up the telephone and dials*) There's a limit to the liberties she can take. (*On the phone*) Hello, Dana please... She's a librarian there... Hebrew literature. (*Angrily*) No, it's not her father.

Hannah: They're getting engaged next week, Zvi. (*He is stunned. He looks at her. He slowly replaces the receiver*)

Scene Eight

She is sitting down. He is sitting facing her and is very angry. He gets up suddenly as though bitten by a snake and rushes into the passage leading to the bedroom. A moment later he returns with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, He sits down, puts one in his mouth and is about to light it. He looks at her. Then he puts the cigarette away.

Hannah: I'm sorry we've gotten into this discussion. It's not the reason I came. I wanted to talk to you about something else.

Zvi: What else is there to talk about? I should have torn my clothes and sat *shiva*. (*Silence. He looks out at the sea*) When he was born we called him Eran. Now he calls himself "Aaron". Not Aaron – "Ara'leh". He used to have long, curly hair. Now his head's shaved. He's left two curled side-locks that he chews on like a little boy in *cheder*¹¹. just as I used to do. Ara'leh! Overnight he's started speaking a strange new language, a mixture of old Hebrew, Aramaic¹² and Yiddish. I've done all I can to try and save him. I told him how I suffered. How I lost my faith. How I was expelled. I offered him therapy. I offered him studies at Juilliard. I promised him that if he came back here I would go back to his mother. Why the hell did you make him leave the academy? Music was his whole life. Let him finish the year at least. I've already paid the tuition fees.

Hannah: I didn't make him leave. He still plays.

Zvi: One day about a month ago, I met him by chance in the bank. He'd gone to close his account. I didn't recognize him at first, with the shaven head and the side-locks. He wouldn't speak to me. I ran after him and caught up with him in the street. The moment he opened his mouth, the dam burst.

¹¹ A Jewish religious elementary school.

¹² A Semitic language from which Hebrew (and other Semitic languages) is derived.

He said all the things that **you** think about me. I'm corrupt, I'm an adulterer, I'm contemptible.

Hannah: If that's what I thought I wouldn't have come here.

Zvi: (*Angrily*) Don't roll your eyes to heaven, Hannah. You look quite satisfied. You've completed your revenge. Thanks very much. I don't think I have anything else to say.

They are silent for a long moment.

Hannah: This argument won't prove a thing, Zvi. It certainly won't bring back the years we lost. (*He remains silent*) But there's a whole life ahead of us. I'm sorry about what I said when you came to see me. You're right. You've always been right. Despite the divorce we weren't divorced. (*He remains silent*) At my apartment I didn't realize the depth of the matter. Only after you left. (*He remains silent. She plucks up her courage and decides to reveal the real reason for her visit*) I haven't stopped thinking about it since that day. There's no point in fighting our love.

Zvi: (*Mockingly*) What did you say?

Hannah: I'm just saying that we can repair what we ruined. (*She stops*). That despite everything we can remarry.

Zvi: Us?

Hannah: Yes.

Zvi: (*Stunned*) Us?

Hannah: Yes. It was out of the question while my husband was still alive. Now things have changed. Now that my husband has passed away, it's become possible.

Zvi: What's possible?

Hannah: That we get married.

Zvi: But just two and a half months ago you said that since you had married another man after our divorce, you are forbidden to me forever. Even if you divorced again. Even if he had died.

Hannah: That's what I said. But I've made some inquiries since then and it seems that I am only forbidden to my first husband if the marriage to my second husband was valid.

Zvi: And it wasn't valid?

Hannah: I didn't want to marry him. My parents forced me. My mother will testify to it. My father, of blessed memory, said that if I didn't agree to the marriage he would throw me out. I was a divorcee. I'd lost a child. I had nowhere to go. Any court will accept that I was married against my will.

Zvi: Have you consulted a rabbinic judge? A rabbi?

Hannah: Yes.

Zvi: Are you sure?

Hannah: I'm well acquainted with marital law and I can't understand why you have to be more particular than the rabbis I consulted.

Zvi: I'm not interested in your marital laws. I want to be sure I understand what's going on here. That I'm not hallucinating. I've wanted to marry you for twenty years, and for twenty years it was impossible. And now it's suddenly a possibility? I want to understand how. Why. Have the laws been changed? Two and a half months ago you threw me out. What happened? I don't understand. You want to marry me?

Hannah: Yes.

Zvi: After everything you said about me? Hannah, I really don't understand. Then it was true and now it's not? And if you really wanted to, then why have you waited for two and a half months?

Hannah: We sat *shiva*. We were in mourning. Afterwards I had to think. I had to check. It wasn't so easy. The rabbis needed time too. I couldn't rush them. They know that a widow can remarry only three months after the death of her husband.

Zvi: So have they permitted you to marry me?

Hannah: When I told them that my husband had been sick for many years and was unable to have marital relations, they decided that in my case the prohibition was not valid, and so we can.

Zvi: So are you permitted or not?

Hannah: *(Smiling)* If you agree, they'll permit it.

Zvi is stunned and confused. Then, a moment later he embraces her.

Hannah: Zvi, I love you. Zvi...

They kiss. The telephone rings. They ignore it. After three rings a woman's voice is heard on the answering machine: "Where are you?... Pick up already. Hello?... Don't make me feel stupid." Zvi hurries to turn down the volume on the answering machine.

Scene Nine

She picks up her purse and takes out a ring.

Hannah: Do you know what this is?

Zvi: A ring.

Hannah: Don't you remember it?

Zvi: *(Recognizes it)* My God! It's our wedding ring!

Hannah: (*Hands it to him*) Here. It should be yours so we can use it again.

Zvi: The very same ring.

Hannah: It was always in my purse. Ever since we got divorced. Every now and again I'd touch it.

Zvi puts the ring in his pocket. He embraces Hanna and kisses her. She takes off her kerchief.

Zvi: Have you thought about where you'd like us to live?

Hannah: Wherever you want.

Zvi: Would you live here?

Hannah: Why not?

Zvi: Nobody observes the Sabbath here. There's no synagogue, no *mikveh*.

Hannah: I'll manage.

Zvi: We can move to a neighborhood that has a synagogue and *mikveh*.

Hannah: If you want to.

Zvi: I'm also willing to keep a kosher home.

Hannah: Only if you want to.

Zvi: It's not such a big sacrifice for me.

Hannah: And you know, some rabbis permit ritual bathing in the sea instead of the *mikveh*. After all, the sea is just rainwater. I'll finally get to buy a swimsuit.

Zvi: I'm not sure you can have a ritual bathe in a swimsuit.

Hannah: (*Smiling*) When I'm completely underwater I'll take the swimsuit off.

He laughs. He likes the thought. They embrace again.

Zvi: There's one thing I've got to know. When you read my books, did they really disgust you so much?

Hannah: After you left I read them again. I really did feel that you were speaking to me through them.

They both laugh.

Hannah: About that girl that... I hope you're not engaged or anything.

Zvi: Of course not.

Hannah: So you're not really committed to her?

Zvi: People don't get engaged here. She doesn't really live here. She comes and goes. She knows I've always wanted to come back to you. By the way, about the children...

Hanna: I'm sure they'll be very happy about our marriage.

Zvi: About theirs.

Hannah: It's out of our hands, Zvi. Even if we wanted to, we can't stop them.

Zvi: But I've got to talk to him first. I want to know about their plans, how they intend to live.

Hannah: They're adults. They're both fiercely independent.

Zvi: I'd still like to know where they think they're going to live.

Hannah: I'm not at all sure they'd want us to decide for them.

Zvi: Maybe they'd be prepared to live here as well.

Hannah: I'm sure that Rivka'leh knows what's best for her. Eran, too.

Zvi: I very much hope so. If they want to live near us, I'll be happy to buy them an apartment. I'll be happy to buy them a car too.

Hannah: Why would they need a car?

Zvi: Eran can't manage without a car.

Hannah: If he wants one, then buy it.

Zvi: So that's it? Shall we break a plate?

Hannah: (*Surprised*) You want to break a plate?

Zvi: When our terms were agreed, your mother and my father broke a plate. My sisters still do it.

She hesitates momentarily, but agrees. Zvi takes a plate from a box, wraps it in paper and puts it on the floor, but the telephone rings.

Scene Ten

The telephone still rings. Zvi looks at Hannah for a moment, picks up the phone.

Zvi: Hello? Yes. Hello, how are you?... Yes, I was looking for you. You called earlier? I didn't hear it... No, no. Nothing's happened. I wanted to ask if you'd given the cat her milk... No. I'm in the middle of working. I've begun a new chapter... At two? I won't be finished by two... Just a minute, Dana, just a minute... Because I want to write in peace and quiet... All right, all right... Of course you're not bothering me... Nothing's happened... I'm terribly sorry but I can't have lunch with you today... Because I'm working!... All right. All right. Bye. (*Hangs up and turns to Hannah*) It's alright. She won't be home until the evening.

Hannah: Evening?

Zvi: I needed a woman with me, Hannah. You know me. I can't live without a woman. I don't write. I start drinking. I quarrel with everybody. She agreed to come over every so often, and gradually...

Silence. The telephone rings again.

Zvi: (*Into the phone*) Yes... I'm telling you that I'm working... It's your apartment too. I just said I'm working. I'm in the middle of a new chapter. That's all... Just a moment, Dana, just a moment. First of all, stop shouting... I'm asking you to stop. .. No. I'm not shouting... But there's

nothing wrong... So this time your intuition is wrong... Stop it, Dana.
 Please. Please... I'm cheating on you? Me?... But we'll have dinner
 together!... Of course. Wherever you like... OK. I'll run the bath for you...
 No, no, I'm not angry. Bye. *(Replaces the phone)*

A brief silence. Zvi unplugs the phone cable from the phone. She picks up her kerchief and ties it onto her head.

Zvi: I must be fair to her. She helped me when I left home. I was by myself.
 She made me sit down and write.

Hannah: I see.

Zvi: Don't worry. I'll work it out with her. Give me a few days.

Hannah: A few days?

Zvi: Three or four.

Hannah: *(Surprised)* And you'll carry on living with her?

Zvi: She's already moved some of her things here. She'll have to find herself an apartment.

Hannah: You don't have to stay with her until she leaves. You can live with your father until the wedding. Didn't you intend to live with him after the divorce so you could write the book about your mother? That way you'll be near me too.

Zvi: Hannah, we've been apart for so long. Another few days won't make such a difference.

Hannah: She'll use those few days to fight for you.

Zvi: How?

Hannah: I don't know. You don't live according to any laws. With you, anything is permissible. I heard you talking to her. She's young. She's probably beautiful too. I don't even want to think about what she'll do to keep you.

Zvi: I don't need laws. There's no law that can bind me more than what I feel for you.

Hannah: I'd be happier if you went to live with your father today.

Zvi: Today?

Hannah: We have to agree on the terms. Tell the children. Your father. My mother. I'd be much happier if you came to Jerusalem with me right now.

Zvi: Now? I just can't be that cruel to her.

Hannah: Please, Zvi. I don't know how these things are handled here.

Zvi: It's inhuman to run away like that from anyone.

Hannah: I don't want to go back to Jerusalem by myself.

Zvi: You don't have to worry. We'll get married even if it takes another week or so.

Hannah: I can't wait for a week or so.

Zvi: Why not?

Hannah: I'm... I'm pregnant.

Zvi: (*Stunned*) Pregnant?

Hannah: When you were with me, I conceived. I'll begin to show soon.

Zvi: (*Still stunned*) You're pregnant? That's wonderful! And everything's alright? How do you feel? You certainly don't look pregnant.

Hannah: I feel fine.

Zvi: I'm so happy. Actually, now I can see that your face has filled out a bit.

Hannah: It's a sign from heaven. We've got him instead of the child we lost.

(*Bursts into tears*)

Zvi: Hannah'leh, why are you crying?

Hannah: I've waited for him for so many years. I was so frightened. I was scared you wouldn't want me.

Zvi: God forbid.

They embrace for a long time. Zvi suddenly detaches himself

Zvi: Why didn't you tell me?

Hannah: Tell you what?

Zvi: That you're pregnant. Why didn't you tell me as soon as you got here?

Hannah: I meant to. We were talking about other things.

Zvi: Why didn't you call me when you found out?

Hannah: What difference does it make? I wanted to be with you when I told you.

Zvi: I'm happy. I'm very happy. I just don't understand why you didn't let me know.

Hannah: I only felt the change in me a month ago. It took a few days until I got the results. I had to understand. I had to think.

Zvi: And then you decided to come to me. When you knew you were pregnant.

Hannah: No, not at all. I wanted to come to you after my husband passed away.
Right after the *shiva*.

Zvi: But you didn't.

Hannah: Because we were in mourning. Because I have a family. Because I was forbidden to you.

Zvi: But a moment ago you told me that your husband was unable to have intercourse, and so you were permitted to me after he died.

Hannah: Yes. But my family didn't know. I didn't want to anger his sons. When your visit ended the way it did, I couldn't call you and tell you I was...

(She falls silent)

Zvi: From the day your husband died you had all the time you needed to tell me that you wanted to marry me. But you only told me after you found out you were pregnant.

Hannah: So what?

Zvi: So maybe you decided to marry me only because you'd found out you were pregnant.

Hannah: That's not true.

Zvi: So what exactly were you thinking about during the month since you found out? What?

Hannah: I told you. It wasn't a month. Another week passed by the time I did the tests.

Zvi: Maybe. I don't doubt what you're saying, but I can't stop thinking about another possibility.

Hannah: What possibility?

Zvi: Perhaps when you found out you were pregnant you went to your court, and perhaps you consulted the rabbis, and perhaps you tried solving the problem in other ways.

Hannah: What problem? There's no problem.

Zvi: Didn't you tell them you were pregnant?

Hannah: Of course I did.

Zvi: So maybe that's why they permitted us to remarry.

Hannah: I've already told you why they permitted us to remarry.

Zvi: (*Interrupts her*) Just a moment. You are prepared to give birth in spite of the fact that he's... in spite of the fact that he's a bastard? You're prepared

for this child and its children to be forbidden from marrying Jews for ten generations?

Hannah: He's not a bastard!

Zvi: He's not a bastard? You were a married woman when he was conceived.

Hannah: He was conceived when I was a widow.

Zvi: A widow?

Hannah: I went to the hospital after the funeral and checked the time of my husband's death. He died at the moment you knocked at my door. When you came into the house I was already a widow.

Zvi: He had died and they didn't tell you?

Hannah: The hospital called. We were otherwise engaged. *(He falls silent. She touches his face but he pulls back)* I asked three rabbis, Zvi. There was no disagreement among them at all. *(He does not reply)* I'd have him even if he were a bastard. *(He remains silent)*

Scene Eleven

She is sitting silently. Zvi looks out the window and lights a cigarette.

Hannah: I don't think smoke's very good for the baby.

Zvi: Sorry. *(He puts the cigarette out)*

Hannah: I don't understand, Zvi. Don't you want this baby?

Zvi: Of course I do.

Hannah: Well, I can't see it.

Zvi: I want the baby. I want you. There's nothing in the world I want more. But I also want to know why you didn't tell me about him.

Hannah: I wanted us to get married because you want to. Not because you have to.

Zvi: But you didn't tell me about him even after I agreed that we marry. Who knows, perhaps you wanted to tell me only after the wedding?

Hannah: I was going to tell you today.

Zvi: Today? I can suddenly see a picture I didn't want to see at all. You're not telling me the truth. I still haven't forgotten how you denied reading my books and how you told me your husband was drinking tea in the kitchen.

Hannah: I've admitted it. I regret it. I thought you'd forgiven me. I'm telling you the truth.

Zvi: And now it's the whole truth?

Hannah: Yes.

Zvi: *(Has difficulty in believing her)* Hannah, I lived too long with a woman who didn't love me. I want to be sure you're marrying me because you want me. Not because you want a father for your child.

Hannah: But I want you. *(He is silent. She can sense his doubts)* I've always wanted you. Even my husband knew how I tortured myself at night because of you. He knew why I prayed and bathed and fasted. When I came in here I felt as I did on our wedding night. Remember how frightened we were? Now I'm not frightened. Not a bit. I won't even ask you to switch off the light. Waiting for the night is just a custom. See, even though I'm not used to this I'm not shy. My husband, of blessed memory, never saw me. Only you have. And I haven't changed much. Maybe I've put on a little weight this past month.

She takes off her kerchief and kisses him passionately. He stops her.

Zvi: This sudden passion seems a bit odd. Where was it an hour ago?

Hannah: Please, Zvi.

Zvi: How come it was aroused just when I started doubting it?

Hannah: It was there all the time.

Zvi: I didn't feel it.

Hannah: Why would I pretend?

Zvi: Don't play the innocent!

Hannah: According to law I don't have to marry you.

Zvi: You can't raise the child without me because your family won't allow it.

The whole community will make your life a misery. They'll spit on you in the street. On him, too. One of your husband's sons is liable to torch your house one day.

Hannah: I don't care what the community says and I don't care what the family says. I can raise this child without you, Zvi, but I want us to raise him together. They'll make my life even more miserable if I marry you, but I'm prepared to bear that torment.

Zvi: Why?

Hannah: I don't know why. Perhaps I'm being punished because I wasn't cautious enough with our first child. Perhaps for sinning against you when we divorced. Perhaps for sinning against my husband, of blessed memory, before he died. Perhaps for sinning against this child when I conceived him.

Zvi: How did you sin when you conceived him?

Hannah: I conceived him when I was still forbidden to you.

Zvi: You see this pregnancy as a sin?

Hannah: We're not angels. Human beings sin now and again. You sin, you're punished and you atone.

Zvi: And you're prepared to bear all that torment to atone for it, right? That's why you want to marry me. To gain divine forgiveness.

Hannah: You waited all these years for me, Zvi. Now you have me. Now we have this child. You've got everything you wanted. Why are you hesitating?

She turns to hug him, but he pulls back again.

Zvi: I just can't understand how you're prepared to make love with me despite your being forbidden to me. *(Takes a cigarette, lights it and moves away)*¹³

Hannah: But I've told you I'm permitted.

Zvi: Every woman is forbidden to her husband before the wedding.

Hannah: There are exceptions. You've already been consecrated to me through intercourse. I'm even carrying your child.

Zvi: What are you talking about? Since when is a marriage consecrated through intercourse?

Hannah: Even Maimonides says that... *(He turns away)* God in heaven, Zvi. We're flesh and blood.

Zvi: I can't shake the feeling that you're deceiving me again.

Hannah: I'm not deceiving you. The body doesn't lie.

Zvi: But if you hadn't found permission in Maimonides you wouldn't have wanted to have sex with me, right? Don't deny it. If you hadn't gotten approval from your rabbinic court you wouldn't have come here at all. You'd have buried your love deep inside yourself until it died, or until you did.

¹³ Smoking can be avoided if production rules forbid it.

Hannah: If I hadn't gotten permission to marry you, I would have gone on asking. I would have gone from rabbi to rabbi, from court to court, until I'd got it.

Zvi: But you wouldn't have come without this permission. Just like my poor mother. You've become a slave to your God just like she was. He decides for you. In the end you'll do what He wants, even if it costs you your life.

Hannah: He doesn't demand that we sacrifice our lives.

Zvi: He doesn't?

Hannah: I can still love you and fulfill His commandments.

Zvi: It seems to me that you want to fulfill his commandments more than you want to love me!

Hannah: Since when has the Almighty competed with human beings for their love? Since when?

Zvi: Since time immemorial!

Silence. She starts dressing. He stubs out his cigarette.

Zvi: I'm not blind, Hannah. I can see your piety. You won't be able to live here like that. In the end you'll do anything to take me back there, as religious as you are, so that you can go on living your pious life.

Hannah: I'm not asking you to become religious again, Zvi. I'm not asking for anything except my right to believe.

Zvi: That's not all you're asking for. You also want the right to observe the commandments. And there are commandments you can't observe unless I observe them with you. We won't even be able to eat from the same plate.

Hannah: I won't force anything on you. We'll live here. Each one in his own beliefs. You, too. And this child, he'll also live the way he wants. I'm prepared to have it all written in the marriage contract.

Zvi: It's not yet a child, Hannah.

Hannah: Of course he is! What do you mean by "He's not yet a child"?

Zvi: You know exactly what I mean.

Hannah: For God's sake, Zvi. How can you even think about such a thing? Haven't we already been through enough?

Zvi: I married Eran's mother because of an unwanted pregnancy as well.

Hannah: I want this child. I've wanted it ever since our baby died.

Zvi: And I want to be sure that you haven't come to me just because of your fear of Him!

Hannah: I won't give this child up, Zvi. I can feel him already. I'm already his mother. I'm thirty-seven. I'm going to have him and raise him whatever happens.

Zvi: How can you say that you want this baby? Since when have you had a will of your own? From the moment you came from your mother's womb you've only done His will!

Hannah: I want this child, Zvi. **I** want it! **Me!** (*Silence*) How am I like your mother, Zvi? I'm following my heart. I'm leaving my family. My home. I've come to marry you and have this child with you here.

He remains silent. He suddenly grasps her hands.

Zvi: I'm prepared for us to get married and have this child, Hannah. I'm prepared to raise him together. I want to raise him together. But without Him. I don't want God in this house. Not at my table. Not in my bed. And not in my grave.

Hannah: I don't understand what you want me to do, Zvi.

Zvi: You have to stop believing in Him.

Hannah: Stop believing? How? Can a person decide to stop believing? You know that my faith is my life. You know that if I stop believing I stop living.

Zvi: I don't want you to bring Him in here. He'll be lying in wait for me everywhere, waiting for that split second of weakness and then grab me by the throat. If I give in just once He won't let go.

Hannah: Who am I to bring the Almighty in here?

Zvi: He'll steal in with you every Sabbath. On every festival. With keeping *kosher*. The *mikveh*. Praying. With every comma of the Torah.

Hannah: He'll be in me, not you.

Zvi: If He's in you, He'll be here. With His rabbis. His prophets. His laws and commandments. Crime and punishment. The next world. The days of the Messiah. I'll hear His voice in your every word.

Hannah: I'll hear His voice, Zvi. Me, not you.

Zvi: I'll know that you're having this child of your own free will only if you give Him up. Only if you give Him up, I'll be sure that you love me.

Hannah: But I've sworn that I love you. (*He remains silent*) I can't give Him up, Zvi. I can't. Who am I without Him? I can't come to you empty. I can't. If we all live with our beliefs, how can I live without mine? That's terrible fanaticism.

Zvi: Can't you see how He's tormenting us? He's come between us once already. Now He's trying to separate us again. There's no limit to His cruelty. He's even robbed me of my only son. When this child is born He'll rob us of him as well. Perhaps it was really He who killed our baby

twenty years ago. Yes, this God of yours is thirsty for our blood, Hannah. Look at how many people kill in His name. How many are killed. My poor mother hanged herself because of Him. If we don't drive Him out of ourselves He'll kill us too. (*As he speaks he tries to embrace her*) Stay with me, Hannah. Stay. Just you and me and the child in your womb. Please, Hannah. Stay, together we can do it. Together we can survive without him.

She stays in his embrace for a moment, then slowly detaches herself and turns to pick up her purse, gets her kerchief, then goes to the door and exits. Zvi remains alone.

Curtain