



The Ultimate

Love Story

Jay Clark

the ultimate love story

A NOVEL

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An imaginary tale inspired by ancient truths

The Ultimate Love Story

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To My Parents

In Memoriam

Their wisdom and insight awakened in me
a profound awareness of the world and my responsibilities to it.

The light of their love illumines my life.

Excerpted from Chapter 1

The sun was setting in Galilee. The intertwining twin light of day and night at dusk has always been magical for Isa. Even when he was only seven he used to wander off from his friends under some pretext to watch the sky, feel the breeze, stare at the setting sun, and listen to a solitary bird coming home. Often he would be lost in some memories ... undefined, fragile but soothing. Now nearly sixteen, his sunset saunters are a part of his daily routine.

Isa closed the door of the work area behind his house. Today, from a special piece of wood he had carved a doll with glowing eyes and captivating smile. The wood was left over from the table he and his father, Joseph, had been working on for a wealthy Roman consul, Joshaya. As the table was for display in the official reception room, Joshaya had especially instructed Joseph to create a masterpiece, “I have heard of your reputation as a master craftsman. I depend on your excellence. Don’t disappoint me.”

Both Joseph and Isa had worked for many hours on this exquisite table. Only the day before, Joseph, who did not easily smile, had patted his son’s back in appreciation for his excellent workmanship, “You are meticulous, son. You poured your heart into creating this work of art.” Isa received this unusual compliment from his demanding father with a gentle smile.

Now, tying the doll, his personal masterpiece, in the hem of his robe he left the yard. The dusk was calling him once again to watch the sun hurtling down the horizon. Often his eyes would rivet on the sun forming a triangle in a trancelike moment. Such moments drew Isa every evening to this solitary spot at the end of town.

On his path he passed by the village well. Today, gazing at the distant sky Isa did not notice a big rock that people used to rest and chat around. In the late afternoon of

course the well was forsaken, or nearly so. Isa heard a giggle as he nearly stumbled over the rock: “Eyes in the sky, feet on the ground; Sure way to stumble down!”

That was the voice of a young woman. She laughed at this handsome but curious young man. Usually, like other village women, she came to fetch water in the morning. But today she told her mother she wanted to do special washing of the new cloth she had woven. It was only an excuse to go to the well in the evening as she was intrigued by this young man taking a walk every day at dusk.

Drawn by the musical voice, Isa turned his gaze from the sun. What he saw transfixed him. One hand on the rope holding the hanging water bucket, another on her hip, this beautiful young woman had the most enchanting laughter he had ever heard. Without taking his eyes off her, he turned, approached her, knelt, and cupped his palms saying, “I am thirsty.”

Chuckling faintly in her throat, the young woman at the well pulled the rope. Her robe twisted around her body as she drew the bucket up. The light in her eyes poured into his upturned gaze as the water gushed into his cupped palms. Cool water sprayed his face and soothed Isa’s lips, mouth, throat. His eyes now were riveted on her delicate feet. Savoring the moment Isa closed his eyes for a few moments. As he arose his eyes moved from her feet to the hem of her robe, reaching the twist at her waist, circling around her bosom, reaching her head and the lock of dark hair fluttering in the evening breeze. Finally, his hazel eyes rested in her dark-brown glowing eyes, interlocking in a wordless embrace.

Excerpted from Chapter 2

Today was Friday, the eve of the Sabbath. It was a perfect time for Isa to amble around, despite Joseph’s fatherly admonition against deviating from strict observance of the holy day. Praying and resting were the rule in Joseph’s household for the Sabbath with

the only exception being an urgent demand from a Roman customer, of course. Isa could easily manipulate his movement on the Sabbath, and an occasional fatherly admonition would not deter a teenager anyway. He had his own covenant with the Heavenly father....

Isa loved to wander in the market place, despite those noisy hagglers whom he despised. A couple of times he had become edgy with a trader who was making an attractive offer to take Isa to the court of an Emperor in the east: "With your good looks and balanced demeanor, young man, you have a bright future," the trader had said with a wink.

"Doing what? Do you plan to sell me as a slave?" Isa had walked away, disgusted.

At sixteen Isa was certainly opinionated. His thirst for knowledge and new experiences was insatiable. With unwavering attention he listened to the stories of vendors, scholars, and artisans from distant lands. Distinct traditions, beliefs, and customs triggered new insight. And he would ask: if they have more than one God like the Greeks and Romans have? Who are their gods and goddesses? What are their rituals? If their god gets angry how do people pacify them? Isa knew the Roman ways, but he wanted to learn how people in distant lands settle their differences. What they do if they disagree with their priests?

Stories of mysterious deeds of wise sages called *rishi*, *muni*, *sadhu*, *sraman*, fascinated Isa; he found them uncanny, yet strangely familiar. God's creation was intriguing, so varied. What was the significance of such distinct traditions, Isa wondered.

This Friday Isa spotted Sriram, his favorite vendor from the Himalayan region who brought, besides spices and herbs, scrolls of writings in a strange alphabet and mathematical formulae. Spicier were the stories of yogis and their fantastic accomplishments that Sriram narrated. Were these yogis performing miracles? Or was God speaking to them as He did to Moses? Or were these stories Sriram's fanciful creations? Whatever the answer, it was a perfect time to listen to Sriram. Today even James, Isa's

brother, came with him. Isa wondered if James was checking on what he was doing on the Sabbath. Did their father tell James to watch his movements? Why was their father so anxious?

Excerpted from Chapter 4

This was the day Joseph expected Joshaya's slaves to come to collect the precious table. Both father and son had been busy from early morning polishing it with a soft cloth to a perfect glow.

For the last couple of months Isa had been absorbed in crafting this masterpiece. Each stroke of his hammer and chisel was music to his ears; it was almost a trance. The wood in his hands became like clay in a potter's hand: a living, pliant matter. One time, a few weeks ago, when Joseph called Isa from the other end of the shed he had not responded. Absorbed in his creation, Isa was in another world! "Are you dreaming again, son?" yelled Joseph. But it was a loving reprimand. Joseph knew how thoroughly skilled his son had become in the family vocation, carpentry. This table was a testimony to Isa's passion.

By midday the table was ready to be dispatched. Joshaya's slaves arrived with the Roman guard in charge.

"Our master, the Hon. Joshaya, requires your young son to come with us to the palace," announced the guard ceremoniously. This was quite unusual; Joseph was not sure why Isa had to go. But one never questions the command of a Roman Consul. Isa was excited by the prospect of getting into the interior of a palace!

Life is getting better...Isa thought. Promptly he rushed to wash his hands, face, feet, and ran into the house and put on a cleaner robe, combed his hair, and tied clean wooden sandals on his feet. Mary looked at her handsome son with joy and pride. Doesn't he look like a prince, Mary thought to herself as Isa came out of the house. Besides, he is getting recognition from the powerful Consul. Cautious Joseph reminded young Isa to be proper

and polite. “Yes...yes... father... I will be careful,” he could not wait to get going. Meanwhile under Joseph’s supervision the slaves had carted the table onto the wheeled carrier they had brought with them. The procession was on its way out of this humble neighborhood, under the curious neighbors’ admiring, and envious, watch.

Soon the precious table reached the palace. With great care, Isa supervised its unloading and placement in the designated reception area as per Joshaya’s instructions. Of course the Roman had paid a pittance for this artistic piece. Such workmanship should have cost him at least four times as much; but a reputed Jewish local carpenter was happy to get a fraction of it.

Joshaya had yet another business angle. He had heard reports that Isa had argued with the learned rabbis at the temple two or three years ago. He was told young Isa was intuitively wise. The astute Roman wanted to determine if he could exploit Isa’s gift for profit during his foreign travels, perhaps even in his diplomatic service! The Roman ambassador had long arms and deep insight for profitable moves.

“Isa is your name, is it?” Joshaya asked sternly.

“Yes, my lord... your Honor.” Isa fumbled as he was ignorant of the proper term of address.

“Soon my royal caravan will be headed to Persia and I would like you to go with us. Do you speak other languages?” Joshaya asked keenly observing Isa’s expression, demeanor, and response.

“Yes my lord, besides Aramaic and Hebrew, I understand Greek, and speak some Latin.” Isa carefully controlled his tone not to emphasize any special talent.

“Where did you learn Greek and Latin? Not in a Hebrew school to be sure?” the note of sarcasm in the Consul’s remark was clear.

Such treatment was not new to Isa. It was part of life. He was not upset. One never knows what comes next, he told himself, and politely answered, “My lord, I picked up these languages in the market place, from traders, vendors, travelers, and soldiers. I am told I learn a new language fast.” Isa politely recounted his sources, downplaying his unusual talent as carefully as he could.

“Do you have any other skills besides carpentry work? Do you sing or play an instrument?” The Consul was checking the worth of his investment. Of course he would make sure to maximize his profit.

“My lord, I sing a little and play the flute some. But I am told I tell stories well. I can make friends easily, they say, because I ask questions without offending people, I am told.” The diplomat in the Consul recognized a valuable addition to his retinue. Isa may be worth a lot more than he had previously thought.

“How far have you travelled from Galilee?” Why was the Consul asking that? Most Jewish people did not travel far, except to earn a living or when they were pressured to relocate by the ruling authority. Exodus under Moses flashed in Isa’s head.

“Not too far, my lord. But I came from Egypt with my parents when I was a little boy. Since then I have lived here, but hearing stories of distant lands and wisdom of other people fascinates me. And then I retell those stories in new forms. Often people invite me to entertain them.” Isa was calculating furiously as he selected every detail, uttering every word carefully in a guarded tone not to sound boastful.

“What do you know of our Roman culture, our gods and goddesses? I know you people believe in one unnamable god. Personally I think *that* keeps you poor. But that’s not my problem. We have more gods and goddesses so praying many, we gain multiple benefits.” It is good business too Joshaya thought to himself. He asked Isa, “Do you know what our beliefs are?” The Consul asked a vital question after a bunch of innocuous

comments. This was an important question as Joshaya did not want to take a defiant Jew in his retinue. He knew of those indomitable monotheists, radicals, and such...

“My lord, I am well aware of your festivals and rituals. Stories of Jupiter, Phoebus Apollo, Minerva, and of the Greek pantheon intrigue me. They add to what I believe as One True God. In my heart I know I have a lot to learn from the traditions of the far Eastern regions too. What I know so far I have gathered in our busy market places where people assemble from everywhere in the world.” Isa thanked God for sending him the right words at the right time. Or did he, he wondered? But when the Consul made the next comment, Isa knew his intuition was right.

“I am delighted, young man, by your sense of curiosity and ardor to learn with an open mind. In two weeks we will march east and I want you to join my caravan. Tell your father I require him to come and talk with me about the arrangement for taking you with me.” Isa was incredulous; he could not believe Joshaya ‘ordered’ a marvelous opportunity for him to travel, something he had always dreamt of but did not expect to happen.....



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