

## The Jackal

From his rocky ledge atop the highest promontory of the mountain, Michael surveyed the panoramic vista below him composed of lush, rolling hills speckled with trees. His keen senses allowed him to be acutely attuned to the colors and sounds in the air and the natural grandeur of the harmonic interplay between greenery and foliage and the shadows they cast upon the broad lake that flowed in between and whose smooth waters spread endlessly into the distance. He was filled with exhilaration, not so much of awe and appreciation, as of possession. For whatever his eyes could see he instinctively adopted as his personal domain. He pondered how he might further explore and enjoy his spacious realm.

But, then, Michael noticed that he was not alone. His sharp eyes perceived that far below him there were intruders invading and despoiling his sanctuary. A family of deer was nibbling on low lying bushes, and over there was a rabbit and then another rabbit and a variety of other small creatures moving about and feasting upon the treasures of his paradise. He could not see how their existence fit into the natural life flow of his spacious habitat. He saw them only as intruders in his self-proclaimed kingdom. He would teach them a lesson and have some sport while making for himself, at the same time, a hearty meal. And this he did, striking terror into all of the creatures that came into his view as he enjoyed displaying his quickness and agility at leaping over low-lying bushes to suddenly pounce upon their unsuspecting and helpless bodies. It did not take very long before he could protect for days the stillness of this, his very personal space.

But one day, while he was feasting upon some berries, he thought he heard a soft voice calling, "Hello Michael." He turned and saw, not very far from him, what looked like an image he had seen of himself when drinking from the lake, only softer and far more beautiful. He had never seen a female jackal except for a dim memory of his mother, long ago. He kept blinking to be sure that she was not an illusion. It was not only the suddenness of her appearance but his perception of her beauty that left him speechless as he stared back at her. He was especially transfixed by her eyes. She was looking at him with the same intense look that he probably had while he gazed at the shining grandeur of his sanctuary. He had never been looked at like this before, not even by himself. It filled him with mixed emotions. He felt naked, uncomfortable and self-conscious but, at the same time, it somehow made him feel real. Then he heard himself asking, "Why are you looking at me that way?" She answered, "Because I love you, Michael." Michael just stared back at her. It wasn't only that he had never heard those words before, but he had never even considered himself as someone or something loveable. In fact, he never tried to be something to love, because that word had no real meaning to him, but rather someone to be respected and feared.

My name is, "Marika", she said as she laughed at his awkward and uncharacteristic expression of confusion. "You don't really know what that means do you?" "Will you invite me to share your sanctuary?" Michael tried to say, "No, of course not", but heard himself say "Yes" instead. Then he pondered to himself that there was no harm giving it a try since he had a lot to be proud of and to boast about. And so he agreed to take her on

a tour of his vast and lush territory, explaining that it might take quite a few days to see it all. “I promise not to be a problem.” she replied. It did not take her very long to begin to adjust to Michael’s daily routine in a way that made it seem even more enjoyable to him. She seemed to take such delight in being shown the colorful plants and the scenic rock formations that he, himself, had hardly noticed before.

Marika taught him how to play games like Hide-and Seek and Michael began to discover that he could laugh. One day he challenged her. “Let’s race to the lake”, and took off at full speed to their favorite drinking spot. He outdistanced her by about ten feet, and then, turned around and chuckled as she reached his side panting. The race to the lake became a daily practice every morning when they awoke and Michael always won. One time the thought occurred to him that she was withholding her strength, but quickly dismissed the idea because that was not something that he, himself, would ever think of doing. He would feel humiliated at losing a race of any type against anyone. But Marika did not look humiliated.

In the morning, Marika always managed to be awake before he opened his eyes and would greet him sweetly with the words, “Hello Michael,” that made him feel a tickle inside. He was not accustomed to feeling anything inside of himself. Everything always existed outside of him. She also seemed to delight in letting Michael prove whatever it was he was trying to prove to her. Michael enjoyed the fact that she always seemed so delighted when he showed her something new.

Marika taught Michael, in her own way, to think about things that he had never thought about before, like the time that she asked, “Did you ever consider, Michael, whether all of the beautiful lilac bushes and the sturdy oak trees and that weeping willow that you love to nap under, all somehow know you and appreciate your enjoyment of them? Michael had always liked feeling alone, fending for himself, not depending upon anyone else and able to enjoy whatever it was that pleased him without having to ask anyone else. “She is really different”, he thought and tried not to ask himself the question, “How much does she really know?” Most uncomfortable was the feeling that she seemed to know more about him than he knew about himself. Occasionally he would disagree with her about something and she would suddenly become very quiet, which lead him to assume that he was right. He knew that he would never remain quiet like that if he thought that she still disagreed with him.

Marika even managed to convince Michael that sharing his spacious sanctuary with other living creatures was not such a bad idea after all. They could be included in the beauty of the natural setting, and that jackals can live on roots and berries and don’t need to kill for food.

One day, Marika said to him, “There is so much to be learned that in one lifetime we can only get one small piece at a time. That small piece is our gift to each other. It is like we are all each others teachers.” “And what is it that you have come to teach me?” asked Michael. “I have come to teach you to experience loneliness”, she responded, looking at him very seriously. Then she abruptly changed the subject as her eyes lit up and she

chuckled, “Bet you can’t catch me”, and she ran off into the underbrush. Michael followed her path eagerly, anticipating with excitement the fun of pouncing upon her soft, laughing body. But after a few moments he could find no signs of her trail. He searched frantically for her. After a half hour, he rested, panting and called out “Marika, I give up. Where are you?” There was only silence. As night began to fall he experienced a sense of panic, which was strange to him, and he desperately tried to remember her last words.

Michael could not sleep all night. His head was filled with the vision of her loving him, mocking him, teasing him, and laughing at his anger that he often resorted to in order to make himself feel strong and fierce. He was relieved when the early rays of dawn brought back his beloved sanctuary from the emptiness of night. But there was no sweet voice to greet him. He gazed out over his sanctuary trying to remember what Marika had taught him: that “nothing appears exactly the same twice and that there is always something new that he had never noticed before.” He looked at the sun’s rays playing upon a low lying row of cumulus clouds slowly changing their shape as they drifted southward. Gradually, as he looked at them, he could make out the face of a smiling jackal with a long trailing body. He turned to point this out to Marika, and then the realization hit him more decisively than even before—she’s not here anymore!

Michael looked back at all of the sweeping beauty spreading out before him as far as his keen eyes could see. And then, like a sudden swooping of all of the energies around and toward him he became conscious of himself, himself as one small part of the beauty and the grandeur and the mystery of everything he could see. And then, he did something that he could never remember ever doing before: he began to cry. And he cried, and he cried, and he cried.