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SAGY ZWIRN

We were all sitting down in the dining room after lunch. We were the only ones there, and nothing remained on the table but breadcrumbs and an empty dish in which boiled hotdogs were served.

"They're all killers," Sergei said. Sergei was a heavyset man with impassioned eyes, with one gold tooth he got when he was a child in Russia, with an ideology. He was a military prosecutor like the rest of us, he wore a uniform like the rest of us. It seemed like everybody in the world was wearing one these days.

"They're all killers," he said again. People said things like that all the time here. It wasn't an easy place to be in, to serve in. Every day you went back home to Tel Aviv or Ramat Gan or wherever and that made it even worse.

Sergei smiled, and Yaniv leaned forward gravely. He was new, and I didn't know him that well, but it seemed like a gesture he used a lot to show he was speaking of something important.

"Some of the people of Judea are blameless. Some are always blameless. But when they bring them here, it's because they're guilty."

"So everyone here is guilty?" Aviv asked. She was beautiful and smart as a whip. I'd been in love with her since the day I came to

the territories. Now she looked at Yaniv, but he did not reply. "If everyone here is guilty," she said when no answer came, "then what do they need us for? They can throw them all in jail for good and be done with it."

"That's fine with me," Sergei said. I smiled. There was something comforting about seeing things in such black-and-white terms, in being so sure about something. I wasn't sure about anything that way. Not that way.

"They're not all guilty," I said. "But a lot of them are. A lot of them are killers." Aviv seemed annoyed, and I looked down, embarrassed. "Only those that come here. The rest are like us."

She laughed. She knew I was in love with her and that I wasn't sure about anything, and it made her smile. Most girls like her, who had ideologies, couldn't tolerate people like me. They liked their adversaries better than someone like me because at least they spoke the same language and belonged to the same species. But she was different, she enjoyed my being from another species, and that was why I loved her.

"You know that they're killers," Sergei said to Aviv when she laughed. "How can you not know that, working here?"

Her smile wavered.

"Some of those that come here are killers," she said. "And they want you to think that all of them are like that, that all Palestinians are killers. But that's like learning about Jews from the population of Israeli jails." She grimaced, as though the thought of this made her bitter. "They want peace, like us. Do you think it feels good to live under martial law?" She shook her head. "And the point is, we shouldn't be here in the first place. We're conquerors."

"But what if the conquered wants to kill you?" Sergei said.

"*Some* want that because we're here when we shouldn't be." She looked at me. "Isn't that right, Immanuel?" she asked. I looked down again.

"Maybe," I said, and she laughed.

We asked these questions often and answered them often. Everybody knew what one would ask and how the others would answer, and there was nothing new under the sun and we did it anyway. Maybe for sport and maybe out of boredom — because sometimes it was good sport and pleasurable to repeat what you and everybody else knew so well. You repeated the old questions

and the old answers, and it was like fighting that war, knowing it would gain nothing and change nothing, and yet you did it anyway because it seemed impossible to do anything else.

When I was very young I wanted to be a lawyer. I didn't know what that meant, but I wanted it anyway. Not because it was a respectable way to make a living, or because it made your mother and father happy and proud, though it was those things too. It was the sort of thing you wanted without knowing why, without there being a reason. One day my father's best friend who was a lawyer was murdered by a client of his. The lawyer had actually done all he could for the client, but the client killed him anyway, and when they asked him why, the client said that it was something he wanted to do and that he couldn't give a good reason. Maybe I should have stopped right there and decided that no, I would not be a lawyer, I will be something else. But I told myself that everywhere you go things can go wrong for no good reason, you can die by your client's hand or crossing the street. There was no meaning in it, so you might as well stick to your own reasons. And I suppose that sounds all right when you tell yourself that, only of course luck or fate or whatever you call it has a funny way of showing you that you don't really control anything: since I was a child I knew I would go to university before my military service and that I would serve in my chosen vocation. There was a certain comfort in this – that you could serve your country without shooting anybody or getting shot, that you could serve the law and remain clean from the blood being spilled. There was meanness about this thought of course, a resounding injustice, but a human heart does generate such feelings, a human mind does think them. Only when it was time to go to the IDF MAG Corps, I was sent to the prosecution in the occupied territories. It was a different world, a whole other world than the one of the coffee shops and theaters of Tel Aviv. Sure, when you went to a coffee shop, somewhere in the back of your mind you knew you might get blown up. But in the territories, there was some other fear, one which could not be explicated to those who had not been there and seen the world that hid behind the veil.

My first day in the territories I met Aviv. She was a tall girl, two years my senior (I was twenty then), with short blond hair and big

green eyes. She was too thin, her lips were far too wispy and colorless, and she never seemed to be without a cigarette in her hand. None of that made any difference though, because she was charming and graceful and more confident than any girl I'd ever met. When she smiled she was damn beautiful, and she smiled a lot. She was also very quick; in one minute flat I could tell she was used to being the cleverest one in a room, and she had about her the air of quiet arrogance that this habit entailed. Yet despite this fact she was also kind – haughtiness and kindness rarely appeared in one body, but they suited her very well. The first time we talked she asked me about politics.

"So what do you think about it, about the occupation and all that?"

I opened my mouth, but then closed it again. For a brief moment some years ago I took an interest in politics. In those days I held solid views about all the matters one who took interest in that sort of thing should have solid views about. But the more I learned about the complexity of the situation, and when I saw how every goodwilled attempt on either side to make things better seemed only to make things worse, I lost my interest in politics, maybe forever. This brief and failed flirtation with ideology and the solid ground that dogmatic answers provided changed me: it was then that I first realized that if the only thing I knew for certain was that I knew nothing, I should do what this outlook demanded. That was when my dream of becoming a writer was born.

"Immanuel?" she asked again. "What do you think about all that?"

"I . . . I suppose I don't know," I said carefully. She was very beautiful and smart and I was very new. I wanted to make a good impression but there was no point in lying. I didn't even know for sure how she felt about it yet.

She looked at me for a long while, as though trying to decide if I was serious. I could tell that for someone like her, someone who believed in her politics so ardently, the idea that someone couldn't say anything either way was almost inconceivable. I thought she would frown and lose interest in me, but she didn't. She just smiled at me and touched my hand very briefly. Her hand was warm and soft when it touched mine, and I think that was the moment I fell in love with her.

"You know," she said. "I didn't always feel so strongly about these things either. But that all changed a month or so after I got here."

"Oh?" I said, eager to hear her speak. "What changed?"

"Someone came here, a blind man."

My eyes widened with surprise.

"Blind?"

"That's right," she nodded. "He wasn't born blind or anything. He was injured very badly in one of the terrorist attacks in Tel Aviv. A terrorist blew himself up in a café, and this man almost died. Eventually they saved him but he lost his sight for good."

"And how did he happen to come here?" I asked.

"He postponed his service like us. He'd just finished law school when he was injured. Of course he didn't have to go into the army because of what happened to him, but he volunteered and asked to be posted here, of all places!" She raised her left hand, as though this proved her point perfectly. Then she took her hand down and placed a new cigarette between her lips and lit it. Smoke filled the small office.

"We talked," she continued. "And I asked him why he chose to come here. This is where it all starts, he told me. The world we live in is a lie, but I see things for what they are. Well, I suppose that was a very strange thing to say, and I didn't really understand what he meant by it. I told myself, well, he's just been through an awful lot, and it makes sense that he'll sometimes say things that don't make much sense. But then I asked him what he thought about the war and the occupation. About that he was much clearer, he didn't speak in riddles. We shouldn't be here, he said, it's wrong. Can you believe that? He was blown up and was blinded, and still he believed that it was all about morality, no matter what happened to him. That's when my outlook began to change."

"I suppose it is all about morality," I told her, and she nodded vigorously. "Though it seems to me sometimes that when the threads get too tangled up everything you do seems wrong and there's no right thing." She looked at me quietly for a moment and then she laughed again.

When I left the dining room the sun was high in the sky. It was very hot and the sands that covered two-thirds of the camp if not

more stretched before me. Sometimes you couldn't tell when you walked from the dining room to the office if you were in the camp or the middle of the desert. Some places you only saw the barbed-wire fence in the distance and maybe some two-story building somewhere and nothing else, just sand and more sand under the hot sun. When you got to the camp you saw the tall, bare cement walls with barbed wire on top and the round tower, and you knew you were looking at a prison. But then you came inside and there was hardly anything there. When you reached the prosecution you saw a few house trailers huddled together some feet away from an iron gate from which dozens of men in shackles wearing brown prison uniforms came in and out every second of the day. That's what you saw and nothing more.

When I reached my office Aviv approached me. I looked at her, my heart beating fast as it always did when we were together. She was pretty and vain and generous, and I studied her like I studied the great writers. I could see she meant to say something, but instead she touched me lightly on the shoulder and walked into the office. I was about to do the same, but then a row of prisoners being led by military cops passed me by. I knew the second man in the row.

"You're dead!" I heard the voice booming. The memory came back to me like a dream. I was in my office and I heard it from outside. I should have stayed in, but I didn't think. I just walked outside as though someone was calling me out, as though there was no risk. It wasn't braveness, just the result of an empty mind.

I saw an MP and a prisoner standing in front of one another. At first I didn't understand. They looked almost like lovers, staring each other in the eye, fascinated by what they saw. Then I saw that the soldier was pointing his rifle at the prisoner. There was no one there but the two of them and me. I realized that the MP must have been in charge of moving the prisoner. The sun was up and it was very hot. I was dizzy and confused. None of it seemed to make sense.

I looked at the prisoner. He had a beard, a long thin face with dark eyes. He just looked at the soldier without raising his arms. He was still shackled.

"What are you doing, Sergeant?" I asked. He glanced at me.

"This man killed my uncle," he said hotly. "Came into his settlement and murdered him. Now he will pay."

I'd never seen a man in such a state. He was so angry he looked like he might explode.

"Sergeant," I shouted at him, "you take down that weapon right now!"

This time he didn't even glance at me.

"What he did, he shouldn't live," he said plainly. I looked at the prisoner's face. It was strange. Even now, he didn't seem to look at us with any special hatred, not even the soldier that told him he was about to kill him. It was as though he expected it. As though he simply accepted that his position in this life required him to kill and to die, and that the same was true for the soldier. That was somehow worse. That cold-blooded murder could simply be a fact, unconsidered, plainly present.

"Listen, Sergeant, what you're doing will end your life, not just his! Put down your weapon!"

"He will suffer," he said, and without another word he shot the prisoner in the leg. The sound of the shot was deafening. I felt it in my stomach. A scream left the man's lips and he fell to the ground. Blood flowed from the wound onto the yellow-white sand. Sweat covered the man's face. For the first time I could see that he was afraid. He had killed mercilessly and was prepared to die, but in most cases even someone who didn't fear death had his measure of uncertainty.

The soldier raised the rifle, pointed it at the man's stomach. My next action I can't explain or defend to this day. Maybe the man's pain made me attentive to his humanity despite everything, and demanded that I do *something*. Or maybe I had just gone mad. But in truth it didn't seem to be something I did at all. The action rather appeared to rise viscerally from my muscles, as though my mind had no say in the matter. I covered the distance between me and the soldier with one long, quick stride and grabbed his shoulder.

"No," I said, and when he didn't put down the weapon I stood between him and the man.

He hesitated.

"What are you – " he said, but at that moment MPs who had heard the shot arrived and dragged the soldier away, stripping him of the weapon.

"You protect him?!" he kept saying as they took him away. The man looked at me and I thought I saw gratitude in his eyes. Maybe even amazement. After all, it might have made sense for Aviv to step in front of that gun, but for me, the one who couldn't seem to speak unequivocally about anything . . . And yet, whatever I believed, this action, however absurd, seemed to be meaningful, correct in some metaphysical sense. In a place like this, I've thought many times since that day, you could expect no more.

I stared at the man for a while, the second man in the row. It was strange. I almost died because of him, and I didn't even know his name. I should have asked for it after what happened, but I didn't. I'd sort of wiped that experience from my mind until now. I didn't ask what happened to the soldier or to the inmate. Everybody around me talked about it constantly for a few days after the shooting – someone said that a long time had passed between the murder of the soldier's uncle and what happened, so nobody made the connection. When they asked me about what I did I evaded the question. The man still walked with a limp, but otherwise he seemed fine. As fine as you could be in shackles.

"Please!" one of the prisoners shouted in Arabic. I turned to look at him. It wasn't just that you couldn't tell he was a killer, if that was the case. He had blue eyes and fair skin and if he didn't speak in Arabic you might think him German or French. He looked terrified. In the camp I once saw a woman who was caught on camera stabbing a young Jewish man to death and she looked terrified too, she looked confused, as though she had wandered into the camp by mistake. "Please," the man shouted, "I'm innocent! I didn't do anything!" He saw me watching him and with outstretched arms he tried to run in my direction, as though I could help him. He must have known that it was pointless, but he did it anyway. That sort of thing happened all the time here, and you learned to move past it. Not looking back, I walked into the office Aviv and I shared.

"Sometimes I really want to get away from this place," she said when she saw me, having heard what happened outside.

"Me too," I said.

I sat down beside her, and we both said nothing for a while. It

was still very bright out and the white sand shone like powdered gold.

"I wonder sometimes what's it all for," she said quietly after a while. I looked at her, and she seemed unhappy. She was beautiful when she smiled, but now she wasn't smiling. I loved her more because of it.

"What's it all for?" I repeated her words.

"I believe in right and wrong, you know, and I think us being in the territories is wrong, but is there a way out of it? A way to stop the blood from being spilled?"

"Carthage was an empire once," I told her. "You know about Carthage?"

She looked at me, a little irritated.

"Not really."

"It was a thalassocracy. That means it was an empire by the sea. It's probably best known because of ancient Rome. Rome went to war with Carthage."

She glared at me, incredulous.

"What does ancient Rome have to do with anything?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Maybe nothing. But you know the story about Hannibal of Carthage who got all the way to Italy with his elephants? It was all part of it. Three wars over a hundred years, and every time there was peace, but it didn't last. Maybe some places aren't built for peace to last. Maybe some places are built for war."

This thought seemed to disconcert her. She wanted to say something, but once again we both fell silent. We sat in the small room, and she lit another cigarette. Smoke filled the office, and we sat there without looking at one another. We were uneasy because of the things that were said, but there was also some relief about it, about being alone together like that, not expecting anything.

Carthage was an empire by the sea. That was a long time ago. It ruled the waters. It was strong. Hannibal and his elephants brought Rome to its knees and then Carthage was brought to its knees. It saw war and died in war. Three times peace broke out, three times peace died. Maybe war is the only thing that doesn't die, because death gives it life and death doesn't die. When I came to the territories I knew very little about death. I still don't understand any of it, but I know some. I know there's a place where death lives

just as people do, and maybe once you come inside, when you cross the threshold, there's no going back. Not really.

We were silent together for a long time. The smoke reached every corner and the room was close and you could hardly see a thing. Then a sound came, and we both started.

"What – " Aviv said, but mid-question she understood what the sound was. It was a gun, a rifle, firing. Instinctively she came close to me and held my arm. She was very close, and I could feel the warmth that came from her body. Then came another shot and another. It was hard to think, to make sense of anything. Foolishly I ran to the window to look outside. I saw two MPs lying on the ground. I didn't see blood, but I knew it was there, flowing. They were dead. There were two prisoners standing over them, holding rifles, but luckily they were looking the other way. They weren't wearing shackles anymore. I turned away from the window, to Aviv.

"What . . . What's happening?" she asked.

"I saw two prisoners with guns. Two – " I trailed off.

"Two dead?" she asked.

I nodded.

Then more shots. One, two, three shots. Screams. And more screams. Men. Women. All screaming. I saw only two inmates with guns when I looked out the window, but if they opened the gate and freed others, if they took the guns from the dead . . . I looked around, listened intently. The shots seemed to be coming from only one side of the trailer, and there were doors on both sides of the office. If the shooters aimed at the walls we'd be sitting ducks. Aviv understood that at the same time I did.

"We need to get outside, to take the other door," she said.

I held her arm, and we walked over to the opposite wall. There was no window in it, no way to see what we were getting ourselves into, but there was no choice, no other way.

"Aviv . . ." I said, looking at her. I wanted to tell her I loved her. I had the urge to tell her that. I'd always loved her, and she knew that, but in a moment like this I wanted her to hear me say it. Out loud. I love you. I heard the words being said in my mind as the shots continued. Suddenly they sounded silly. Suddenly it felt like there was no such thing as love, not anywhere. Like maybe it was all a lie, like the blind man said. It hurt to think like that. I'd never

much believed in anything, except for love and other people. I believed that that mattered. So I opened my mouth, wishing to say something, but nothing came out. She nodded as though I had spoken and squeezed my hand.

"I'll go first," I said, and then I opened the door. I saw the sand and nothing more. No prisoners and no guns and no men and women in uniform. I walked out and Aviv followed me.

"Let's get to the gate," Aviv said. "When we're out we can call for help."

We ran together across the white sands, the sun burning bright, ablaze in the heaven. It was very hot and humid, and it was hard to breathe. After mere moments we were drenched with sweat and the uniforms clung to our bodies. It didn't occur to us to look for weapons. We were lawyers, not soldiers. Not really. So we ran. Then we saw something in the distance that made us stop. I grabbed Aviv's hand and we hid behind a nearby trailer. From behind this shelter we saw two prisoners with rifles, one of them pointing his weapon at a soldier with his hands up. The prisoner was screaming, preparing to fire. Aviv squeezed my hand. She didn't say, "We have to do something." She knew there was nothing to do. Tears were running down her face, so I put my arm around her. We were both shaking. Then something unexpected happened. A third prisoner appeared and lunged at the man with the gun. It was the man who'd screamed about his innocence before.

"This is it, this is the time," she whispered to me. "They won't notice us. We'll get to the courtroom and from there the way to the gate is short." Before I could reply she grabbed my hand and set off. We crossed the distance running. The inmates continued to fight with one another and we heard another shot, but kept going. When we reached the courtroom, another trailer, we came inside and closed the door. They didn't seem to notice.

"Okay, let's move on – " I said, but then broke off. She was holding her hands to her stomach, clasping it as though it might fall off if she didn't. She was very pale and her hands were red. I saw that now. All red. She gasped and I held on to her as she fell to the ground. I saw the tears in her eyes. Confused, dazed by her injury, she began to laugh. She smiled. I held her and looked at her and didn't know what to say. What could I say? So I just held her and kissed her hand. It was cold. At that moment the door opened.

The first thing I saw was the edge of the rifle. I knew then that I would die. That Aviv would die. I wondered if in this state, lying here, Aviv still believed in all the things she believed in with the same fervency. Because it seemed to me moral ideas looked very different under fire. They sort of bent. But maybe she did. Maybe she believed in those things the same way as before.

"Aviv . . ." I said. She looked up at me and continued to smile. She looked beautiful, and I thought to myself that love was a real thing after all.

The door opened completely. It was one of the prisoners. He pointed the gun at me, ready to fire, but then he paused. What made him pause, I remember asking myself. But then I understood why. He was limping. I recognized his thin face and dark eyes. He was the man the MP shot. Holding Aviv with both hands as though to shield her, I stared into his eyes. His rifle was still up, but he seemed hesitant. I didn't say anything and neither did he. For an endless moment we remained there, not taking our eyes off each other. Then he took down the rifle and walked away, closing the door behind him, as though it was the only logical thing to do.

Aviv looked at me and I put my hands on her hands on her stomach. She continued to smile. I didn't know what to do. There was no way to call for help and I was afraid that if I tried to carry her out, that alone would do her in. I glanced up at the judge's bench above me and the gilt menorah with the two olive branches, and the Israeli flag above it. Here judgment was passed every day. Maybe that was still true now. I kissed Aviv's hand again. I couldn't think of anything else to say or do. What had the people of Carthage felt when they waited for their conquerors, I wondered. What had the mighty Romans felt as Hannibal with his elephants arrived to bring them low? Did they feel anything like this? Outside many shots were fired. What happened transpired in mere minutes, and now I heard cars driving outside. They were trying to contain the riot. Would they get here in time to save Aviv, I wondered. To save me?

I sat down on the floor next to Aviv and held her hand. Some moments her eyelids drooped closed, and some moments they opened, and she looked at me sleepily. I almost imagined her smoking her cigarette, the smoke filling the room. I stopped listening to the shots outside. It didn't seem to matter anymore. I lay

on the ground and whispered in Aviv's ear. Nice things. Things you'd like to hear in case it was the end. I would have liked to listen to such things now but there was no one to tell them to me. Then, when her eyes opened one time I saw her raise her hand and point at something. I looked up to see what the thing was, but there was nothing. Maybe she saw what the blind man spoke of, what most everybody never gets a chance to see.