

Dry,  
deliberate,  
monotonous,  
his voice drones  
on and on.

His face is the face of a bespectacled rat, self-satisfaction gleams in the myopic eyes, he is sweating even more than usual in the sweltering heat of the windowless hall. His stance is rigid, one hand leaning on the table behind him, the other digging the stick into the floor as if he wants to make a hole in it. The two sweat stains under his armpit grow. Soon, I say to myself, those stains will spread and spread, they'll cover his pockets and shoulders, they'll spread down his chest and his trousers, he'll stand there in his soaking wet uniform and melt into a puddle in front of our eyes, nothing will be left of him but his voice droning on in our ears. He stoops over and leans on his stick, like an old man laboriously getting into gear to take his first step, straightens up, and sweeps the stick over the map behind him without even turning his head. Raffy Nagar and Muallam pass between the rows to wake the sleepers with a well-placed kick. My eyelids are heavy as lead, drooping and begging, if only for a moment to close, my whole body yearns to succumb to the temptation of that heaviness and sink like

lead into the depths. Again the alarm goes off, jumping out of some anxious corner in my mind and beating like a fist at my heart, my drooping head snaps back and my eyes open, braking the soft glide down the seductive slope. I find it harder and harder to resist the temptation. More than a victory, every arousal is only a reminder of the bestial, degrading heaviness overpowering me like everyone else, the same brutish heaviness that overpowered Avner on the night watch.

I peep at the glazed, tortured eyes of the people sitting next to me, catch the hint of a despairing smile from Hanan on my right, fighting a losing battle like me. It's not as late as all that. If we had the evening off, if we were in our barracks now, most of us would be sitting and talking, maybe Ressler would start strumming his guitar and we would sing. Micky and Alon would be conducting one of the endless arguments they've started having recently. Why does the hand of sleep lie so heavily on us here? Is it the stuffiness of the air in the hall, the droning monotony of the Intelligence Corps captain's voice, or is something that comes from inside us? The power of the defeated, I say to myself, is the power of hatred. This possibility occurs to me like a last hope of energy. The saving hatred begins coursing through me, the captain's voice sounds like an insect knocking against a closed windowpane. I welcome his voice: let it come and buzz in my ears, let it send shudders running down my spine and fan the flames of my hatred and my glee. Even though I know that all this is nothing but an exercise to keep sleep at bay, I respond gladly to the warm rush of emotion and I abuse him in my heart: insect, miserable buffoon, insect, who's going to listen to a clown like you. Crawl back into your rathole, rat, drone away, nobody'll hear a word you say.

Soon he would stand in his sweat-soaked uniform in front of a blank wall of disobedient ears, ears that refused to hear, and even if they stood an MP next to every man in the hall, the only response he'd get would be blank looks from expressionless eyes saying only one thing: No, no, no. While I was busy organizing this rebellion, concentrating my gaze on the captain as if trying to hypnotize him, there was a dull

thudding noise. Zero-Zero, who had fallen asleep, had been given a hefty shove by Raffy Nagar, lost his balance and fallen to the ground. The lecturer stopped talking for a minute, sounds of laughter broke out like little flames of rebellion, and immediately subsided. The instructors rushed in to find the laughters and punish them. The captain continued. Now, he said, he would keep the promise he had made at the beginning of his lecture and tell us the details of the action in Khan Yunis, secret details he stressed, not for public knowledge. I could see Alon's profile in the row in front of me. He was eagerly drinking in the captain's every word. When the lecturer drew lines and circles on the map with his stick, Alon fixed his eyes on the spots indicated and saw things that none of us could see in them. Alon knitted his brows in concentration, the captain's dry, deliberate voice drones on monotonously, and to Alon his words sounded like the glorious verses of an ancient epic, declaimed by the elder of the tribe to the young warriors sitting in a circle at his feet, calling silently on the spirits of their ancestors to come and inspire their hearts and empower their arms for war. This is how Alon seemed to me as I saw him narrowing his eyes in concentration, his face tense, his head bursting with visions of heroism. Ever since his enlistment Alon had been cut off from his origins. On his kibbutz, he told us, officers and fighters who come home on leave would tell the other members and the younger generation about secret missions and heroic paratroopers raids, about special mysterious crack units that the public didn't know about. Alon knew the names of illustrious warriors the rest of us had never heard of, and he called them by their nick names, as if he was one of their closet friends. Now I saw him return to himself from his inner exile, the exile which we, who were so different from him, had imposed upon him by the very fact of our difference; in these moments I saw him shaking off the dull weight of the cloddish earth, the savage and exhausting sadness of the interminable arguments with Micky, and soaring back into his true element, the bright blue skies and far horizons of legend. But there was no fear of Alon flying up too high, like Icarus, and plunging to his death in the ocean

depths, his wings melted by the heat of the sun. It was enough to catch a glimpse of Micky's ironic smile to know that this moment of respite too, this sudden bestowal of grace, would be eroded by nagging arguments, dragged down by the humdrum daily reality of all the pettiness, the ugliness, the vulgarity, the selfishness, the sickness and the diaspora-mentality by which he presumably felt himself surrounded.

I couldn't understand what drove Micky to keep dragging Alon into these arguments and hurting him by what he said. I had no doubt that Micky formed and from time to time changed his opinions simply in order to be in a position to contradict Alon. Since the first day on the base, when he had extolled physical strength and regretted his inability to serve in the paratroopers, Micky had changed his opinion several times. For him, or so it seemed, these debates were no more than an intellectuals amusement, whereas for his opponent they were a source of insult and pain. Perhaps Micky felt that the principles on which Alon's opinions were founded were sufficiently sturdy to serve as the anvil for his hammer, or perhaps they were far closer to Micky's own heart than he himself realised. and it was their danger that he sensed.

There was about an hour left before lights out. Micky and Alon were sitting on their beds getting ready to go to sleep. Peretz-Mental-Case's gang were for some reason in high spirits and their vociferous mirth infected the rest of the platoon, rousing them from the lethargy which had descended on them during the lecture. Alon said: "You hate everything. You don't believe in anything. In anyone. How can you be that way? Maybe for an old man it would be normal. But not at our age. Everything's out there waiting for us. Great things to be done. And what's left for you?"

"The trouble is that you don't listen to what I say and argue with things I never said," protested Micky. "All I said was that the Intelligence Captain, like everybody else, doesn't dream at night about the State of Israel and the Jewish people. What he really cares about is getting ahead in the army, getting promoted, getting more power, more prestige, making more of an impression on his mates, on the girls he fancies. That's it.

That's what makes people run. The source of their energy. It's true that this energy gets spent on important things too, I don't deny it, but that's not the main goal. What I can't stand is all this Zionism, the hypocrisy and the bullshit. All those ghastly phrases. I hate it. It's a lot of lies, hypocritical pretence. It's like poison."

"Anything anybody does for others, for society, looks to you like hypocrisy and Zionist bullshit. Because you're incapable of believing that anybody exists who doesn't think only of himself," said Alon. There was a smile of contempt and disdainful forgiveness on his thin, chapped lips. "You also said that the whole business with Uri Illan's suicide in the Syrian jail was hypocrisy and pretence/bullshit. You don't believe in anything. You'd even be prepared to leave the country. You don't give a damn about it, do you?"

"You know what," said Micky, "if the whole nation becomes an army and the whole country a front, like you people want, then I'm not interested in staying here. I don't want to live like that. I'm quite capable of living somewhere else, it wouldn't be the end of the world for me."

"The question is," said Alon, forcibly restraining his feelings, his lips trembling with the strain of the effort, "the question is, whether to belong to something big. Or not to belong. It's a question of the size of your world. That's the question."

The bed next to mine, empty and mattressless, suddenly made me think of Avner. We had all forgotten him. Nobody had mentioned him since he went to prison. As if he had never existed. I felt no regrets on his account, but the fact that he had been forgotten was like an insult.

"After all the blood," said Alon. "after all the sacrifice? So much blood has been shed so that you can live here, so that we can all live together."

"I don't want all that blood on my conscience; I don't want all those sacrifices on my back. You don't understand Alon. I don't want to owe a debt like that to anyone or any country in the world."

"You don't want to, but you have to. They debited your

account, without asking you."

"You're saying something shocking," said Micky "I don't know if you realise how shocking. What you're talking about is slavery. Slavery to previous generations, slavery to future generations. Debts, debts, debts. And when are you going to do your own thing, the thing you believe in and want because its yours and yours only? And for your information, I didn't say anything about Uri Illan and I certainly didn't accuse him of hypocrisy. How can I judge him? I was talking about all the bullshit in the Knesseth, the press, the radio. All the hypocritical hue and cry against the Syrians. How dared they, and so on. What's that supposed to mean: he goes there on an intelligence mission in their territory and they catch him. So they threw him in jail like any other spy. So what's all the fuss about? What do they think, they can make fools of the whole world? And what would we have done if a Syrian soldier had entered our territory to spy or carry out some mission? His suicide and the letter he left are something else, that's his business, his conscience, his decision, and those are things I have every respect for."

"You're trying to get out of it," said Alon. "Uri Illan was sent there in your name too. And you definitely can judge him, and he did what he did because he took your judgment into account. A man commits suicide and leaves a note: "I did not betray." Who is that letter addressed to? Himself? No. He does feel that he's got something to say to you. He does feel his debt to all of us. It's important to him to make it known that, he didn't betray us. He owes it to us all."

"No! Micky raised his voice. "No! Alon, you don't understand me at all. I didn't send him there and he wasn't there in my name. Whoever sent him – sent him. He doesn't owe me a thing and I don't owe him a thing. That's why I don't judge him. I have no idea what happened there. I don't know the details. If he was a traitor or wasn't a traitor is none of my business, and believe me I don't give a damn. It's his own affair. He doesn't owe me an account. He doesn't owe me a bloody thing!"

"You can't really think that," said Alon. "you're not



living on the moon. You live here in a society that acts together, with mutual responsibility, you can't escape it. You can't get out of it. That's the way it's built, and your will can't change it. You can't get out of it, Micky!"

There was a kind of threat in Alon's tone, Maybe he knew that he should cut the conversation short before it turned, like the others, into the kind of quarrel which left a residue of pain and hostility in both of them, but then the mean, brutal, ugly smile appeared on Micky's face, the same smile that always appeared there when the debate grew acrimonious and he directed his barbs at Alon.

A bad smell of something burning spread through the barracks from Perez-Mental-Case's corner. Panic broke out among his pals. Zackie jumped up and shook a smouldering blanket. He threw the blanket on the floor and stamped on it. Then he picked it up and displayed it to the others: there was a big, charred hole in it. They burst out laughing.

"Ben-Hamo, look what you did!" cried Sammy. "Take the blanket you burnt and bring me yours quick sharp!" said Zackie. "You're crazy," giggled Ben-Hamu, "it was you burnt it with your match. You threw that match down and you didn't see it was still burning. What d'you take me for?"

"Ben-Hamo!" intervened Peretz, with all the weight of his authority as leader, "What kind of a way is that to talk? Didn't we see what happened with our own eyes? You pulling our legs or what? Go and fetch your blanket now and take that one!"

"What d'you want of my life?" sniggered Ben-Hamo, searching the eyes of his friends for a sign that the joke was over. "It was Zackie burnt it with his match. I ain't got no match nor no cigarette neither. Have I got fire in my hands or what? How could I burn that blanket? Hey? Tell me that!"

"You heard him!" said Zackie. "You heard him say it was me! Just so he doesn't try and get out of it afterwards. Did I do it?" He gave Rahamim a hard look.

"Yes," said Rahamim.

"There," said Zackie, appealing to the group at large, "you heard him! He says it was me that did it."

"Ben Hamo, stop it!" scolded Peretz. "You playing with fire, boy!"

Ben Hamo remained alone in his contention.

"Go fetch that blanket now before I get mad at you!" instructed Peretz-Mental-Case. But Ben-Hamo persisted in believing that they were only having a joke at his expense. And he tittered and clapped his hands and wriggled his shoulders in the movement that never failed to elicit the delighted laughter and rude remarks of his comrades, but this time nobody laughed. They glared at him angrily. The suspicion that they wished him ill must have penetrated him at last. He stood up and looked at them for a minute, dumb with astonishment.

"We're all witnesses," said Zackie, "that you burnt the blanket. So what you're going to do about it?" And he immediately turned to each of the men sitting next to them and one by one they all confirmed that it was Rahamim who had burnt the hole in the blanket.

Peretz rose from his place, walked over to Rahamim's bed, took one of his blankets and replaced it with Zackie's - burnt blanket. Then he put Rahamim's blanket on Zackie's bed, slapped his hands up and down against each other as if shaking off dust and said: "Enough! Finished! Enough talking."

Now there was no longer any doubt in Rahamim's heart that they were serious.

"Why're you doing this to me? What've I ever done to you?"

"If you don't shut your mouth, I'll tell everybody what you want to do to me at night, trying to get into my bed all the time and make me let you hug me and kiss me and all that. And a lot worse too. I'll tell all that stuff to the instructors and they'll bring MPs and take care of you for good, like they do in the army to buggers like you."

An expression of relief crossed Rahamim's face, he tried to laugh, to take part in the fun, but was confronted again by a wall of accusing eyes. He went to his bed, sat down on it, crossed his legs, cupped his chin in his hand and waited. When he saw that nobody was talking to him and his friends were all getting ready for bed, he asked them:



"And how did I do it? Go on, tell me!"

Zackie explained "Suddenly you felt like a smoke, and you dunno how to smoke, do you, 'cause you're not a man. So your fag fell on the blanket and burned it."

"Wise guy. You think you're clever, don't you," said Rahamim. "When you come crawling into my bed at night you sing a different tune: Zackie, Oh Zackie, my eyes, my souls, please let me touch you down there," said Zackie, mimicking Ben-Hamo's Wheedling voice to the loud guffaws of his friends. He sighed and said plaintively: "Is it my fault I'm so handsome? What do I need it for? All it does is get me in trouble."

"Go to hell!" said Ben-Hamo, "You and your stories. Nobody believes you, everybody knows your a liar."

He made his bed, spread out Zackie's scorched blanket and contemplated the hole as if considering how he might repair the damage.

Zero-Zero called over to him: "You can darn it like a sock. I'll get you some thread from my wife." "Thank you very much," said Rahamim.

Again there was a burst of laughter from his friends' corner, but he didn't hear the remark which had given rise to their mirth. "What now?" he asked. "What's the matter now?" But his question only made them laugh louder.

Muallem came in for the lights out and Rahamim made haste to conceal the scorched part of the blanket under his body. Muallem who had heard the laughter and noticed Rahamim's quick movement to hide the incriminating hole, said: "Up to your tricks again, Ben-Hamo? You'd better watch it. I've got my eye on you."

"Sir, I didn't do anything," said Rahamim. "I told you to watch it, so watch it. This is the army here, and not what you might think."

After Muallem left there was silence for a while in the dark barrack-room, until it was broken by Zackie saying: "Never mind, Ben-Hamo, don't cry, if you behave yourself I'll give you what you want." Rahamim made no reply. From my bed I could see his shadow turning from side to side.

"You hear me, Rahamim?" asked Zackie.

"Let me sleep," said Rahamim. "I have to get up soon to go on guard."

And he tossed and turned again, as if the scorched blanket was still on fire, burning around his body. Then I saw his shadow sitting up in bed, his arms hugging his knees and his head bowed, as if thinking. Perhaps he had decided to stay awake until his guard duty.

Zackie and his friends were still whispering in their corner, laughing softly, and I saw Rahamim's shadow leaning towards them from time to time, presumably trying to catch what they were saying, after which he immediately resumed his former position, as if his dignity depended on it.

Perhaps at that very hour a little group of paratroopers was crossing the border into Jordan or Egypt, stealing down the village path, climbing up the mountain terraces and descending into the wadis, without dislodging a stone, without showing against the skyline, at the sound of a dog barking or a voice calling: "*Min hada!*" in the darkness dropping instantly, as one man, to the ground, as if the earth had swallowed them up, making a detour round the village and coming into the fields and orchards of that ancient, mysterious land beyond the border, where another moon shone, carrying explosives on their backs to blow up a police station or an army HQ, spreading panic and dismay in the enemy ranks, after which the attackers would immediately slip away and make their way home, fleet and light of foot, brave-hearted and full of enterprise, and they all looked just like Alon, their faces sunburnt and resolute as his, bearing on their shoulders the stretchers with the wounded whom they would never, never leave in enemy territory.

Perhaps at that very hour a suicide squad of *fedayeen* were infiltrating into the country, stealing through the orange groves, emerging into the border villages and roads to ambush their prey, to throw grenades at buses, to murder people on their way to weddings, to stab a watchman in the back. Their faces were masked by their keffiyehs, empty, blank, resembling nothing.