

COMING HOME

A One-Act Play

By Motti Lerner

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Translated by Anthony Berris

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The Characters:

Yoni: A soldier (20)
Daniel: His father (50)
Ruth: His mother (45)
Talía: His girlfriend (18)

The set

The first two scenes take place in the living room of a nice house in a nice neighborhood in Tel Aviv, Israel. Scene 3 takes place in the living room and in Yoni's bedroom simultaneously.

The time

Sometime in 2002

Scene 1

Living room. Friday afternoon. Enter Yoni. His bag and gun are over his shoulder. He has come home from the army for the weekend. To his parents' surprise his head is shaved.

Ruth: Yoni...

Daniel: **(Angrily)** Why didn't you switch on your cell-phone? We've been calling you every five minutes. We called your friends. No one knew where you were. Why? Where were you?

Ruth: Have you cut your hair? You asked me to cut it.

Daniel: I'm talking to you. I booked a tennis court for this afternoon. Why did it take you so long?

Ruth: **(To Daniel)** It's OK. Please. He's here now. **(To Yoni)** We watched the news. We were so worried. **(Notices a scratch on his face)** What's this?

Daniel: **(Still angry)** Why didn't you call us from the bus?

Yoni: It's just a scratch.

Ruth: **(Tries to hug him)** I didn't recognize you for a moment. Like this. With no curls. Suddenly your eyes seem so big. Have you been crying?

Yoni: **(Avoids her)** It's probably the wind in my eyes. maybe some dust.

Daniel: The haircut scared me. Why didn't you call when you left the base? Mom almost died of fright. She hasn't slept for five weeks. She hasn't gone to work. She couldn't see her patients. She hasn't gone to the hairdresser. She takes a tranquilizer every two hours.

Ruth: **(Angrily)** Please, Daniel!

Daniel: **(To Ruth)** If he'd known, he would have called us.

Ruth: What are you talking about? **(To Yoni)** It's not true. I'm all right. I work every day. You don't have to worry about me. **(Tries to hug him)** Just one hug, Yoni. Just to make sure everything is in its place. **(He avoids her)** You look so pale.

Daniel: Why has your cell-phone been off for so long?

Ruth: **(Screams)** Leave him alone!!

Daniel stops. He was probably angry only because he was trying to hide his own fears. Pause. He controls himself.

Daniel: Sorry. I'm really sorry. I don't know what happened to me. I don't understand anything anymore. I probably shouldn't watch the news. I shouldn't read the papers. I should just

keep playing tennis. **(To Ruth)** I told you to give me some tranquilizers too. Didn't I?

Ruth: **(Tries again to hug Yoni)** I won't drive you crazy, Yoni. I promise. I'll keep my mouth shut. I'll let you rest. I'll let you go out. I just want to see that you're all right.

Yoni doesn't answer. She is worried. So is Daniel. Long silence.

Daniel: **(Breaks the silence)** So how are you? Say something.

Yoni: I want to eat, Mom. I want a steak. A steak with fries. Lots of fries. And ketchup.

Daniel: Didn't you hear him? He wants to eat. **(To Yoni)** They still don't give you enough food there, the bastards. Do you want me to call them? I'm playing tennis at six with this colonel from headquarters. I'll certainly ask him about the bus. You shouldn't have to wait ten hours to be picked up. Mom almost fainted. **(Puts the ketchup on the table)**

Yoni: Oh, ketchup. I love ketchup. Do you remember how, before everything began, I used to make a puddle of ketchup on the corner of my plate, and then dip the fries in it? Now I shake the bottle hard, and spray the ketchup on the fries. All over. And on the steak. See how I've changed?

Daniel: **(Confused)** Yes.

Ruth: **(Serves him the food)** Bon appetite.

Daniel: Eat. Eat. You know what? To hell with the colonel and the tennis. I don't really want to play with him. It's just that I couldn't wait for you anymore. Every time we hear a knock at the door we almost pass out.

Ruth: **(Touches Yoni's head)** One of my patients has shaved his head like this too. He was taken into the army for a month and his hair turned completely white. I told him he should just color it, but he insisted that his hair had betrayed him.

Daniel: On Monday, after that bus blew up, I was late for court. I was sitting in the car, trying to get you on the phone. The stupid judge couldn't understand it. I already told Mom. The moment you get out of the army, we're getting out of here for a few years, until people come back to their senses.

But Yoni can't eat. He just plays with his food. Suddenly he starts to undress.

Yoni: Straight into the washing machine. Everything. This too. The dust, the mud, the grease, the oil, the margarine, the coffee stains.

Ruth notices bloodstains on his shirt.

Ruth: What's this?
Yoni: Yuval's blood.
Ruth: **(Shocked)** Yuval? Which Yuval? Yuval from your class?
Daniel: No. That's impossible. He probably only got.
Ruth: He probably only got wounded. He's in hospital. Isn't he?
He'll be all right. I'm sure.
Yoni: He's dead.

Silence. Daniel and Ruth shudder. They suddenly hear Death climbing up their stairs. Yoni continues undressing. Ruth stops him before he takes off his underwear.

Ruth: Wait. Do you want pajamas? Or a towel?
Daniel: I'll get you my robe.
Yoni: Why? What do I need it for?

He takes off his underwear and continues eating. His parents try to overcome their embarrassment.

Daniel: So. So what happened to Yuval? You must have been right there. You must have seen.
Ruth: If we'd known, we would have come with you to the funeral. We would have stood with you there. With his parents. With your friends. If you want, we'll go visit them tomorrow. **(He doesn't answer)** We're not really angry with you, Yoni. We know you couldn't keep your cell-phone on all day. It was foolish of us to try calling you.
Daniel: **(Still insisting)** How did it happen? Was he wounded? Did he suffer? You must take care of yourself, Yoni. Do you hear me? I don't want you doing anything foolish.
Ruth: We didn't hear anything about it. I can't understand. **(Sees Yoni stands up)** Where are you going?
Yoni: To the beach.
Ruth: Sit down. **(He sits down)**
Yoni: **(Suddenly stops eating)** My guitar. Where's my guitar?
Daniel: What guitar?
Yoni: My guitar.

Ruth: **(Surprised)** You sold it.
Yoni: I sold it?
Ruth: Yes. When you went into the army, you said you'd never play it again.
Yoni: Why did you let me? Why? You're my parents, for God's sake. You should have known.
Daniel: What should we have known?
Ruth: We can buy a new one. If you want.
Yoni: I need it now. For the beach.
Daniel: What's the matter, Yoni? Why are you so tired?
Yoni: Nothing.
Ruth: Aren't you happy to see us?
Daniel: What happened out there, Yoni? What happened to Yuval? Don't play games with me.
Ruth: **(Angrily)** I think it's better you go and play tennis, Daniel!
Daniel: What do you want? What did I say? I'm worried about him!
Yoni: Where's Talia? I left a message on her mobile. Didn't she call back? **(They are silent)** Did she, or didn't she?
Ruth: I don't know. We haven't seen her. We haven't spoken to her. We thought you'd spend some time with us first, and then.
Daniel: I can call her right now if you want.
Yoni: Doesn't she understand I need her?
Ruth: Shall I call her now?
Daniel: **(To Ruth)** Now? I told you to call her yesterday. I told her to invite her for dinner. If her Dad doesn't mind, she can stay overnight here. And I told you not to sell his guitar. I told you he would need it. Didn't I tell you? Didn't I? But you do only what you want.
Ruth: Go play tennis, Daniel. Please, go. Come back tomorrow. Come back whenever you want. If you want Valium, I'll give you Valium. If you want to go to America, go to America. Go to Canada. Just go.

Suddenly Yoni takes the bottle of ketchup and sprays it around wildly, on the table and the floor. Daniel and Ruth jump on him.

Daniel: Stop it.
Ruth: Stop it now.
Yoni: **(Stops)** Sorry. **(He goes back to the table and carries on eating)**
Daniel: **(Whispers to Ruth)** Clean it up.

Ruth: **(Whispers back angrily)** You clean it up. If it weren't for you and your stupid pride, he wouldn't have gone there. He wouldn't come home like this. I don't have to die like this every day, every hour, every minute. Neither does he. He's an only child. He shouldn't be there at all. You shouldn't have signed for him. I begged you not to sign.¹

Silence. Daniel wipes the floor.

¹ In Israel if a soldier is an only child, he can volunteer for service in a combat unit only if his parents sign a declaration of consent.

Scene 2:

A few minutes later. Daniel is still on the floor, cleaning up the ketchup. Yoni is still naked. He is sitting eating. Enter Talia.

Talia: Hello.

Yoni: Hello.

He stands up and goes to her. She is embarrassed to see him naked.

Ruth: Maybe you should put something on, Yoni.

Yoni: Why?

Ruth: Please, Yoni.

Daniel: Sit down. **(To Talia)** Hello, Talia.

Yoni: **(To Talia)** I had a haircut.

Talia: Are you sure everything's OK?

Yoni: Sure.

Daniel: I want you to get dressed!

Yoni: **(To Talia)** Are you afraid of me?

Talia: Why should I be?

Yoni: I don't know.

Talia: I was at Yuval's funeral. His mom asked about you.

Yoni: **(Nervously)** About me?

Ruth: **(To Yoni)** She's probably collecting photos of him from his friends. I think we have some of the two of you. We'll give her everything tomorrow. **(To Talia)** He needs to take a bath now. He needs to get dressed and rest a while.

Daniel: **(To Talia)** His bus was late. He just got in a few minutes ago.

Yoni: **(To Talia)** What did she ask? What did she ask? What? We couldn't do anything. A woman came to the checkpoint. We thought she was pregnant. No one suspected her. When she got close to us her belly suddenly exploded. One minute and Yuval was already. Right in front of me. My helmet flew into the air. All my hair got burnt. And suddenly silence. Nothing moves. Only the head of this stupid cow rolling on the road. Bump, bump, bump, into the mud.

Ruth and Daniel are shocked. They try and hug Yoni, or at least touch him and make sure he's alive.

Ruth: Yoni...

Daniel: Oh, God. It's a miracle. Yoni.

Yoni: Leave me alone!

Talia: Let's get out of here, Yoni. Let's go somewhere. Maybe we'll go to the...

Ruth: **(Stands between them and turns to Talia)** You're not going anywhere. I want to have a look at you. Have you been to the hospital?

Daniel: Why didn't you call us? We would have dropped everything and come to see you.

Ruth: Do you have any burns? Any bruises? Nothing?

Yoni: No.

Talia: Let's do something, Yoni. It doesn't matter what. We'll decide on the way.

Ruth: **(Stands between them)** I think you had better go by yourself. He's exhausted. He needs to relax a little.

Yoni: She's not going anywhere.

Ruth: **(To Talia)** Can't you see that he doesn't feel well?

Yoni: She's not going!

Daniel: I don't understand, Yoni. Why couldn't you look Yuval's mom in the eye? What can she blame you for?

Talia: Let's get out of here, Yoni. Please. I've got my dad's car. I don't have to return it until tomorrow.

Yoni: So let's go to the beach.

Talia: Great. Where are your shorts?

Yoni: My shorts?

Talia: You have to wear shorts at the beach.

Yoni: Why? Why should I wear shorts at the beach?

Talia: Because.

Daniel: You can go to the beach, if you want, Yoni. That's fine with us. But you can't go without shorts.

Yoni: **(To Talia)** And if I put shorts on, will you go with me?

Talia: Yes.

Yoni: Really?

Talia: Sure.

Yoni: Together?

Talia: Yes.

Ruth: **(Decisively)** I think we'll go with you too.

Daniel: Yes. Sure.

Talia: But we want to talk.

Ruth: We want to talk too.

Yoni: **(To his parents)** You are not coming with us.

Daniel: We won't sit with you. We'll sit at the restaurant.

Yoni: You are not coming with us!!

Ruth: Ok. Ok. We are not coming.

Yoni: Great. There's no place on earth like the beach. I'm going to live on the beach. All my life. On the sand. In the sun. Till my brain melts. **(He looks inside his bag)** Where's my shorts? I always have them with me. Two weeks ago we go into Bethlehem. There are riots. They're shooting. And mortars, too. We take up a position on the roof of a five-star hotel. Down below there's a swimming pool. Every morning, eight o'clock, I go down and swim. **(Finds his shorts)** Outside it's hell. Bombs. Grenades. Wounded. Dead. Sirens. Children screaming. Mothers crying. And I'm swimming back and forth. Back and forth. In these shorts. When I get out of the water, the bellboy brings me a towel and a Coke. With lemon.

He laughs and puts on the shorts. Daniel and Ruth feel more relaxed now and they laugh with him.

Daniel: **(To Ruth)** Did you hear that? With lemon! He knows how to live, this kid. He'll live the good life wherever he goes. What a boy.

Suddenly Yoni feels that he can't wear the shorts.

Yoni: I can't wear them. I can't. **(Takes them off)**

Daniel: Put them on!

Ruth: Please!!

They try to force Yoni to put on the shorts.

Ruth: They're just shorts. We bought them last summer. Don't you remember? You picked them out yourself. When you tried them on you went into a changing room where your literature teacher was trying on a skirt. Don't you remember how we laughed?

Daniel: I don't understand, Yoni. They won't allow you onto the beach like this. The first policeman to come along will arrest you. You've come home for only one day and you want to spend it in jail?

Yoni: **(Desperately)** Don't touch me.

He takes the ketchup bottle and aims it towards them. They freeze. He sprays the ketchup onto his head and shoulders and chest. He really looks as if he is terribly wounded. After a while he lowers the bottle, and lowers his eyes.

Talia: I think I'm going home, Yoni.

Yoni: No. Please, don't. **(Choked)** Please.

She stays. Pause. Ruth takes a towel and wipes the ketchup from Yoni's body.

Daniel: **(Suspiciously)** What happened there, Yoni?

Yoni: Nothing.

Daniel: What happened? It's not about Yuval. Is it?

Talia: He doesn't want to talk about it.

Yoni: Nothing happened. I had a fight with my friends.

Daniel: What friends?

Yoni: My friends.

Daniel: Why? What did you do?

Yoni: Nothing. Just a fight.

Talia: Can't you see he doesn't want to talk about it?

Daniel: What did they want?

Yoni: Nothing.

Daniel: Come on. What happened? Tell us.

Yoni: I don't know.

Daniel: Tell us!

Daniel takes a glass vase from the table and smashes it on the floor. Yoni shivers. Talia hugs him. After a moment he relaxes.

Daniel: What happened?

Yoni: I was lying at the top of a hill.

Talia: You don't have to tell them, Yoni.

Daniel: What hill?

Yoni: A hill. An olive tree. A broken-down hut. Thorns. Just a hill above a checkpoint.

Ruth: So what did they want?

Yoni: I don't know what they wanted. I lay there and watched the tanks and the soldiers below.

Talia: **(To the parents)** Why are you doing this? What for? What do you want from him? Nobody talks about things that happen there. Nobody. Nothing good will come of it.

Ruth: And then?

Daniel: **(Threateningly)** And then?
Talía: **(To Yoni)** Let's get out of here, Yoni.
Yoni: At noon, the kids come out of the school in the village and start throwing stones.
Daniel: Keep talking.
Yoni: And then suddenly I see a boy with a big bag over his shoulder. Suddenly he starts running towards the checkpoint. The moment I notice, I fire at him.
Daniel: Good. Did you hit him?
Yoni: Yes.
Daniel: Great. Where?
Yoni: In the head.
Daniel: Good boy. Wonderful. And then?
Talía: Please, Yoni.
Yoni: But he keeps running. His brain explodes. Blood pours out of him like a fountain. And he keeps running. After what happened with Yuval, I couldn't take any chances. So I shot him again. In the neck.
Talía: Stop it.

She tries to shut his mouth with her palm, but he struggles and goes on with his story.

Yoni: But he still keeps running. You can't imagine how much blood these fucking Arabs have. So I shoot him again. This time in the chest. And again. In the shoulder. And again in the head. And then he finally falls down, the shit, near the soldiers.
Daniel: You deserve a medal.
Yoni: Don't you understand? I should have stopped him further away from them. They don't trust me. They won't talk to me. They don't want me there with them.
Daniel: It's not your fault. They should have shot at him too.
Yoni: He ran the whole damn way with his bag on his back.
Ruth: But the bag didn't explode. Did it?
Yoni: No. He only had books in it.

Yoni starts laughing. After a moment he stops, takes his uniform pants, and puts them on. Daniel and Ruth are shocked. Talía, who isn't surprised because she has heard about the incident from Yoni's friends, hugs and kisses him.

Talia: Who cares about friends like that, Yoni? They're nothing. Nothing. I'm your friend. Your only one. Forget all the others. Don't even think about them. For days on end I've been waiting for you. We only have one day. We should have fun all day long. What have we done that we don't deserve it? What? You know what, Yoni? Let's go to your room. Let's be there alone for a while.

She takes him by the arm and they go to his room.

Scene 3:

A few seconds later. Yoni's room. Yoni and Talia sit on the bed. Enter Daniel and Ruth.

Daniel: You can't go back to the army tomorrow!
Ruth: You're not well. You must see a doctor first.
Yoni: Get out of the room..
Daniel: I've got a friend who's a doctor. I'll talk to him. He'll write you a note explaining that you had to stay home.
Yoni: Get out of the room.
Ruth: You want me to call an army doctor?
Yoni: I've told you to get out.
Ruth: First listen to what the doctor says.
Yoni: **(To both)** You listen to me. I want you to get out of this room.
Talia: Please. We want to talk.
Ruth: If you were really healthy, Yoni, you wouldn't want to go back there.
Talia: He's perfectly healthy!
Daniel: OK. OK. I won't call the doctor. I'll call your colonel. He's not an idiot. He'll let you stay here for a few days.
Yoni: You're not talking to anybody. Please, just leave us alone!! We want to discuss something.
Daniel: I want to discuss something with you too. You've been there for two years already. You've done enough. You have a life of your own. You don't have to sacrifice it.
Talia: Please, let us be alone for a while.
Daniel: **(To Yoni)** If it's so important for you to be in the army, then go to another unit. I'll talk to the colonel and he'll post you somewhere else.
Yoni: I don't want to be posted somewhere else.

Ruth: **(Desperately)** Listen to us, Yoni. You're not going back there. Do you hear me? You're not. Even if I have to chain you to your bed!

Silence. Suddenly Talia takes off her clothes.

Daniel: What are you doing? Stop it. For God's sake, what are you doing??

Ruth: Have you lost your minds?

Daniel: Put your clothes on! **(She continues)** Put your clothes on! **(She continues)** Put them on!

But Yoni takes off his pants too and gets into his bed with Talia. Daniel and Ruth give up and leave the room. The scenes in Yoni's room and in the living room will take place simultaneously. Inside Yoni's room Talia and Yoni are alone. She hugs him.

Talia: I missed you so much. I didn't call because I was afraid that if you don't answer, I'd get hysteric. And if you answer, I'd start crying. Do you want me to turn off the light? Shall I put some music?

Yoni doesn't answer. Meanwhile Ruth and Daniel are in the living room. Ruth takes a Valium.

Ruth: Take one.

Daniel: I don't need it.

Ruth: Take it.

Daniel: I don't want to.

In Yoni's room Talia keeps hugging Yoni.

Talia: You probably know that nobody here talks about love anymore. But I love you. I should have told you long time ago. I thought you knew. You know that my father arranged that I'd be posted in your regiment? I'll join you right after basic training. Why are you so quiet?

He doesn't answer. In the living room Ruth picks up the phone and dials a number.

Daniel: What are you doing? **(She doesn't answer)** Who are you calling?

Ruth: The district psychiatrist.
Daniel: What for?
Ruth: There's no other choice. He's going to send an ambulance.
They'll hospitalize him even if he doesn't want.
Daniel: In a madhouse?
Ruth: Only for a few days. The army won't take him afterwards.
Daniel: They'll stuff him with drugs. With electric shocks. He'll be
mad forever.
Ruth: They'll take care of him.
Daniel: Over my dead body.

He grabs the phone from her hand. Back to Yoni and Talia.

Talia: Please, hug me a little. Do you like it this way? **(Yoni
doesn't answer)** Afterwards we can get dressed and go to the
beach. We might climb on a yacht and run away. Please, hug
me, Yoni. Please.

Talia caresses him. He loses his patience and screams.

Yoni: Stop it. Just stop it. Just shut your mouth and open your legs.

**She is shocked. He tries to lie on top of her. She avoids him, gets out of
bed, gets dressed, and leaves the stage. Ruth and Daniel hurry to
Yoni's room. To their amazement he is putting on his uniforms.**

Ruth: What are you doing?
Daniel: Where do you think are you going?
Ruth: You still have another day to be with us.
Daniel: What's the matter, Yoni? What have we done? What's
wrong?
Ruth: You are ill. You are not going back to the army before you
feel better.
Daniel: You are not going back to the army at all.
Ruth: We've just talked about it, Yoni. We might find a way to get
you out of the country for a few months.
Daniel: I have a friend in passport control at the airport. He owes me
a favor.
Ruth: You can even go to India, if you want.
Daniel: **(To Ruth)** To India??
Ruth: He's always wanted to go to India.
Daniel: He'll go to America. My best friends are there. Sam. Sam and
Sandra.

Ruth: He'll go wherever he wants.
Daniel: Ok. You'll go wherever you want. Just drop these bloody shoes. Sit down. Please. Not everybody has to be a soldier. You don't have to be angry. You don't have to be embarrassed.
Yoni: I don't have to be a soldier? Why? Because I shot a damn Arab? I shot him because I was trying to save my friends.
Daniel: I'm not worried about the damn Arab, Yoni. I'm worried about you.
Yoni: If I don't kill an Arab to save a friend, no friend will kill an Arab to save me.

Now he is already fully dressed.

Ruth: The poor Arab can rot in his grave, Yoni. I don't give a damn about him. You are not going back to the army!!
Yoni: I've already forgotten the damn Arab. Nobody remembers him anymore. Nobody thinks about him anymore. We don't want to remember. We don't want to think. And I'll tell you why we don't want to remember and think. Because we have to get through tomorrow. Because we have to get through the day after tomorrow. That's why I don't want to think. Because if I think about the damn Arab again, I'll have to shoot a bullet in my head. Is that what you want? **(Screams)** I didn't know he only had books in his bag. I didn't know!

Daniel and Ruth are shocked. Now they finally realize what he is going through.

Daniel: Listen to me, Yoni. Please, listen. How can you say such a thing? Because of that stupid boy? Of course you didn't know he only had books in his bag. How could you? You did what you had to do. Anybody would have done the same. There's no doubt about it. Of course it's his fault. He shouldn't have run towards the checkpoint with that bag on his shoulder. **(To Ruth)** Say something to him.

But Yoni has put his bag on his shoulders. He's just about to go. Daniel hurries and takes Yoni's gun.

Ruth: What are you doing? Leave him alone.
Daniel: He is not going back to the army. If he goes, he won't come back.

Ruth: He won't go.
Daniel: He'll go and they'll send him back in a coffin. If no one else shoots him, he'll shoot himself.
Ruth: Leave him alone. I'll sit with him all night. If he goes back tomorrow, I'll go with him. I'll go with him wherever he goes. Nobody will touch him.
Daniel: Can't you see what's become of him?
Ruth: He's my child. If you touch him, I'll kill you.
Daniel: **(Painfully)** We should have done it the day he was born!
Ruth: I swear to God I'll kill you.
Daniel: I want him alive.

Yoni, who is now ready to leave, walks towards Daniel.

Yoni: Give me the gun. Give me the gun.

Before Yoni reaches him, Daniel sways the gun high and shoots at Yoni's foot. Yoni screams. His pain is unbearable. Daniel stands there shocked, and watches him cry. Ruth bangs her fists desperately on his back, but he doesn't move. Lights fade out slowly. Only Yoni's crying is heard in the darkness.

End