

May 14, 2019

I Was There

A monodrama

By Motti Lerner

Translated by Roy Isacowitz

©

While this play is based on actual events, the characters and their actions are fictional and bear no resemblance to actual participants in the events described.

5 Massada St. Ramat Hasharon 4729097, Israel
Tel: 03-5405295. Mobile: 054-4583356
motti_lerner@hotmail.com

The Character

Ido Biton (33) is a high school teacher living in Beersheba. He is married to Orli (30), a teacher at a primary school in the city. They have a son named Itai (3).

Background to the Play

Ido serves in the Israel Defense Forces reserve army as the commander of a 155 mm artillery battery. He and his battalion were mobilized at the start of Operation Protective Edge on July 8, 2014, with Ido attached to an infantry battalion in the southern Gaza Strip as forward artillery observer. In that capacity, he directed the artillery on targets chosen by the infantry commander. In the early hours of the morning on Friday August 1, later known as Black Friday, Ido joined the battalion commander in his APC for a survey of the battalion's positions. A ceasefire with Hamas was due to go into effect at 08:00 that morning. At 09:16, a reconnaissance team came across a Hamas unit. In the exchange of fire that ensued, the company commander and his radioman were killed and a platoon commander was mortally wounded. The Hamas unit dragged him into a tunnel and disappeared. When the abduction of the officer became known, the brigade commander implemented what is known as the Hannibal procedure.

The Setting

The play takes place at the end of December 2014 in the Beersheba Cemetery. The stage is empty. Ido addresses the theater audience as if they are mourners at his funeral. Three timescales are intermingled in the play: The **present** takes place during Ido's funeral, during which he addresses the mourners, among them his wife, Orli, his parents and Amir, his brother; the **past** comprises the series of events that Ido describes, from the night of August 1, when he deserts from the front and takes refuge in his home, until his death at the end of December 2014; the **third timescale** comprises a series of flashbacks to the events of August 1, during which he carried out the orders of the battalion and brigade commanders to direct artillery fire onto civilian areas of the town Rafah. The monodrama is, of course, a single sequence; the numbering of the paragraphs is for work purposes only.

Note: The flashbacks to the battle are printed in the font Arial.

Lights up on Ido who stands center stage and addresses the audience.

1. You're unable to utter a word. I can see. The funeral is over, the gravediggers have gone, but you are still standing, hurt and silent. Unable to leave. I see you trembling with tears, Orli. You look at each other in horror. Questioning how? what? why? Why didn't you ask the day I returned from there? Why didn't you listen when I tried to explain to you? You knew that I was there on that Black Friday. You knew it. If you won't understand what happened there, you'll continue to think that I lost my mind. That I went insane. Itai will also think that his father was mad. I want you to know what to tell him when he grows up...
2. On that Friday, the sun went down at quarter to eight. The fires that still burned in Rafah lit up the way for us. At eight-thirty we returned to the battalion's mustering ground. The commander's APC parked. The driver turned off the motor. There was silence. No-one moved. No-one said a word. I opened the door of the APC and got out. Dragged myself to the area behind the command tent, dropped to my knees and vomited. Then I got back to my feet, walked over to the water tank, soaked my face and drank. What am I doing with myself now? What am I doing with myself? Around me, exhausted soldiers are spread out on the ground between the APCs, resting. Waiting for orders. The officers are gathered around the commander for a briefing. Suddenly I hear the engine of the supply vehicle turn over. Before I can even think what I'm doing, I run to the commander's APC, grab my kitbag, jump onto the moving vehicle and hide in the back, among the empty ammunition boxes. The driver doesn't see me. At the first junction after we cross the border, the driver slows down. I hop off and sit on my kitbag by the side of the road. My body's trembling. I sip from my water bottle. Now I can finally breathe. What am I doing with myself? What am I doing? The lights of a car leaving the nearby kibbutz fall on me. I know that if I get into the car, I become a deserter. Deserting the field of battle. What will my soldiers think of me? I'm a teacher. An educator. What will the students at school think? What will you think? If I don't get into the car I can return to my unit. No-one will notice I even left. The car approaches. I stand and raise my thumb. The driver stops. Beersheba? Yes.

I open the door and get in beside him.

Has the war ended?

My son's ill.

I wish him well.

I get out at the entrance to the city. Where to, now? No, I don't want you to see me like this, Orli. I don't want to frighten Itai. I turn into your street, mom and dad. No, Friday night. You're already asleep. So, where? To you, Amir? You're probably at the hospital, in the operating theater, treating the day's wounded. My legs lead me home. I open the door. Turn on the light. Glance into Itai's room. He is soundly asleep in his little bed. I enter our bedroom. You, too, are asleep, Orli. I place the kitbag on the floor and put my rifle on it. Suddenly, you wake.

Ido? What happened? What happened? I couldn't answer.

Are you OK? You hugged me. You kissed me.

I heard on the news that you had a terrible day. I was worried. I knew you were there. Do you want to drink? To eat? A shower?

I couldn't utter a word.

Say something already. Don't scare me. I held you. Cuddled in your arms. You let me be. At two in the morning the doorbell rang. We both froze. You got dressed and opened the door. Two military policemen entered the apartment. The sergeant approached me. Captain Ido Biton? I didn't answer.

You're coming with us, he said, and produced handcuffs.

No need, I said.

What did he do? Where are you taking him? Let him at least say goodbye to the child. He hasn't seen him for three weeks.

Sorry, said the sergeant.

You hugged me with all your might. Say something. Speak. Tears welled up in my eyes. You wiped them away with your hand. I love you, Ido.

3. The sun rises. We're out on a reconnaissance. I'm sitting next to the CO in the APC. Behind us is A Company. We're surveying the brigade's southern front. The ceasefire is due to go into effect at eight. I'm looking through binoculars. Palestinian civilians are returning to their homes in Rafah, men, women and children. They're carrying bundles and packages, after spending two weeks hiding far away from the shelling. This time, Hamas apparently intends to keep to the ceasefire, I say to the CO.

Apparently, he says.

It's already eight. We progress slowly, examining every hut and every hovel. Every hothouse could conceal the entrance to a tunnel. At nine-fifteen, there is shouting over the radio. A patrol has been attacked. The company commander is dead. His radioman dead. The CO of the third platoon dead. The CO of the third killed? He slept next to me last night. We rush to the scene of the clash. On the way, we hear on the radio: The platoon commander wasn't killed. He was seized and taken into a tunnel. The brigadier has ordered the deputy company commander into the tunnel to rescue him. We jump out of the APCs and cover the mouth of the tunnel with our weapons. Now the deputy company commander and his team are emerging from it. They're carrying the webbing and helmet of the missing man. Covered in blood. There's no doubt about it. He's been wounded and abducted.

The brigadier screams through the radio. Hannibal procedure. Hannibal procedure. We're going to get him back. Stop them and get him back. At any cost. At any cost.

I take the list of targets from my satchel. The Hamas command bunker. Maybe they've already made it that far. Robot, this is Coat. Robot, this is Coat. Over. Robot this is Coat. Target Tiger 3. Ten per minute. Five minutes. Fire. Over. The battery begins to fire. Shells fall at an insane rate. Boom. Boom. Boom ...

4. The MPs pushed you aside and shoved me into a jeep. They take me to military prison south of Tel Aviv. I ask the sergeant-major if I can call you, Orli. She's looking for me. She's worried about me. I also want a lawyer. A soldier who deserts in the middle of a battle has no rights. He puts me in a cell. I grab the phone from his pocket, get down on the floor and try to phone home. He tramples my hand with his boot, takes the phone and throws me into solitary confinement. I'm alone. Entirely alone. Quiet. Total quiet. Suddenly I hear someone crying. Crying in a voice that I've never heard before. A voice that is not mine is crying inside me. An hour. Two. Three. Then the door opens. A warder comes in with a plate. I'm not able to eat. I'm on hunger strike. Until I see my lawyer. **(Shouts)** I'm on hunger strike until I see him, or until I die ...

5. You see the cars on that road? Maybe he's in one of them. Fire on them, the CO says.

Robot this is Coat. Robot this is coat. Azimuth thirty. Right fifty. More hundred. Over.

The battery opens fire. The shells fall along the road.

Now on the square.

The square is filled with people.

On the square, he shouts. We have to stop those bastards.

I'm not firing there. Won't do it.

The commander calls the brigadier on the radio. The brigadier calls me. Coat this is Apex. Do what you're told. That's an order.

Apex this is Coat. The square is full of people.

You'll do what you're told. You hear me? If not, I'll come down there and put a bullet in your head.

Apex this is Coat...

Did you hear me?!

This is Coat. I heard. Over.

The soldiers in the APC are also shouting. Fire. Fire. Stop fucking around. If he's alive, he's praying to be hit by one of our shells. Suddenly a mortar lands close to us. The blast pins me to the side of the APC. The smoke is suffocating. Come on! Fire! screams the CO.

Robot, this is Coat. Azimuth thirty. More five hundred. Right two hundred. More five hundred. Right two hundred...

6. Next morning, the door of the cell opens and the sergeant-major comes in:

Go shower. Shave. Change clothes. Eat something.

I want a lawyer. I want to speak to my wife. Then behave yourself, he says. I shower. Shave. Change clothes. Eat. A sergeant puts me in a jeep. We drive south. After an hour-and-a-half we're at the brigade HQ. The jeep stops outside the brigadier's tent. The sergeant escorts me inside. Sitting beside the brigadier is my battalion CO. The brigadier raises his eyes and recognizes me. Aren't you from Beersheba? Aren't you Sarah Biton's kid? Yes, sir. She was my kindergarten teacher. What happened to you there? You've always been such a good guy. Suddenly you go mad?

I carried out illegal orders, sir. I fired hundreds of shells into civilians...

We had to get the officer back. Live or dead. That's what the Hannibal procedure is all about.

Dozens were killed by those shells, sir. Hundreds wounded. Thousands of homes were destroyed. I killed them, I wounded them. I destroyed their homes. With my own mouth...

The brigadier has gone red.

I gave you those orders, Biton. The Division CO and the Southern Front CO heard me on the radio. If they weren't legal, they would have stopped the firing.

There's no way they were legal, sir. Those were civilians, not combatants. Old people. Women. Children. There needs to be an inquiry.

Of course there'll be an inquiry. As soon as the war ends. Maybe even a commission of inquiry. Go home now. I don't want to try you in your condition. Rest a bit. Recuperate. We'll talk after the war.

I want to be tried, sir. For deserting. And for carrying out illegal orders.

Go home, Biton, he orders.

You turned me into a murderer, sir ...

Get the fuck out, the Battalion CO bellows.

The sergeant takes me by the arm and pulls me out of the tent.

They're waiting for you at the gate.

7. Orli and Itai, you dad, and you too, mom, getting out of Amir's car. Itai dashes over to me, leaps into my arms and clings to me. His smell. His smell. He strokes me. Uncle Amir says you're broken, dad. Where? Your hand? Your leg? Show me. Does it hurt. You shush him, Orli, and embrace me fiercely. We get into the car. Dad makes a blessing. Mom says: Don't worry. The brigadier did his kindergarten with me. I'll speak to his parents. Amir is driving: Come to me at the hospital tomorrow. I'll write you an authorization for your absence. You'll return to the army and to yourself. But none of you dare ask anything. Dad says: Everyone in our family is made of steel, and that goes for you, too, Ido.

8. We returned home. The schools were on summer vacation. We decided to get away from the missiles falling on Beersheba. We moved with Itai to your parents in Haifa. They didn't ask any questions either. They, too, didn't want to know. Mornings, we went to the beach. In the evenings we went to movies. At night I took sleeping pills. But whenever I closed my eyes, I was back there, in Rafah. Itai sensed that I couldn't fall asleep and came to our bed every night, holding me with his small hands. By the end of August, the war was over. We returned home. The school year began. The second-grade students told you, Orli, of their nights in the bomb shelters. The eleventh-grade students told me about the missiles that fell on the city, of the home that was hit in the fourth district and about the other that was hit in the fifth. I told them of the hailstorm of shells that rained down on Rafah. Of the dozens of civilians who were killed and the thousands of homes that were destroyed. One plucky girl said: It sounds terrible, Ido. The others weren't impressed. They didn't want to know.
9. I don't give up. Every week I phone my CO and ask when I'll be called to testify before the investigative committee. Each week he says that the investigation is still ongoing. At the end of October, he calls:

The investigation has concluded, Biton. Everything we did was legal. We acted according to the regulations. No personal conclusions were reached against anyone, including yourself.

I want to see the report. It's confidential.

I want to be tried! But he put down the phone.

I asked for a meeting with the brigadier, but it was refused. I wrote to the Chief of Staff and the commander of the Southern Front. They responded that the committee of inquiry had transferred its findings to the Military Advocate General, who had approved them. Everything was legal.
10. We're moving through the suburbs of Rafah. Firing into building after building to make sure they're safe. The bulldozers tear apart every suspicious building. We already know that the abducted officer is dead. Parts of his brain were found in his helmet. It's his body we're looking for. The area is crowded with civilians. They can't flee due to the firing. I shut myself off and continue directing the guns. Robot, this is Coat. Target Banana 2. Five per minute. Five minutes. Fire. Over. Robot, this is Coat. Azimuth thirty-eight. More hundred. Right fifty. Now the air force joins in. The civilians have not yet been evacuated. Nor have they received any warning. Boom. A one-ton bomb falls on a crossroad. We can feel the blast. I look through the binoculars. The dust scatters. My God! There were houses there. Trees. People. The bomb wiped out everything. Everything. Only a huge crater remains. Empty...
11. After a few days, Amnesty International in London publishes a report on our shelling. One-hundred-and-seventy dead. The majority civilians. Some six hundred wounded. Thousands of homes destroyed. I print out two-hundred copies and send them to members of the Knesset, journalists, reserve officers. No-one gets back to me. I write a

letter to *Haaretz* newspaper, describing what I did and saw, and demanding that I be tried. It provokes a storm. My CO calls me.

You're dismissed from the battalion.

Why? You can't dismiss me without a trial.

A trial? What for? You're spreading these accusations because you don't understand anything about war. Because you don't understand what it takes to win it.

12. The next morning, I arrive at the teachers' room. Sit down at a table. Three of the teachers sitting around it get up and move to another table. A moment later, the principal walks in: I want to talk to you. I follow her to her office. She shuts the door behind me. I have no choice, Ido. You're an excellent teacher. An excellent educator. But you can't continue teaching here.

Why?

The Department of Education has discovered that you deserted from your unit during the war. The supervisor maintains that you can't continue to be an educator. It's bad enough that you deserted, but you also incite against the army in front of the pupils. Parents phoned yesterday and threatened to keep their children out of school. We don't talk politics here, Ido.

It's not politics. I only told them how I feel as a human being. A human being in front of other human beings. I'm their teacher. I can't hide the truth from them. You want them to join the army at the end of the year and do what I did?

Do me a favor, Ido. Don't argue with me. It's not my decision.

13. I took my bag and headed for the gate. On the way, a number of students stopped me. Where are you going, Ido? We have a class now. The principal fired me. Fired you? Why? Because of the letter I wrote to the newspaper about the killing in Rafah? What killing? The killing I told you about. I was part of it. You were part of it? You? I directed our artillery onto civilians. Onto streets. Houses. Cars. Schools. Hospitals. How could you do such a thing? Why are you telling us? We have our matriculation exams at the end of the year. I'm telling you because I was a coward. I was weak. Because I hope you'll be stronger than I was. Other students began to gather around us. We're going to the principal. We won't let her fire you. But the security guard was quick to push me out the gate.

14. **(To Orli)** I returned home and told you.

You're right, Ido. The killing was horrible. Horrible. The army knows that as well. That's why they appointed a committee of investigation.

But they didn't publish the findings.

Perhaps they think that the discussion has to remain internal?

The discussion has to be open, Orli. Everyone needs to take part. Those responsible for the killing need to be punished. Including me.

You've already done enough. Your letter was very effective.

If there is not an open discussion, such killing will become the routine.

The army doesn't want such killing to become the routine. That's why the Hannibal procedure has been revoked.

Revoked? How do you know? Your CO called me. He called you?!

He asked me to calm you down. To calm me down?! He said that you're harming the battalion. And us, too. You won't be able to find a job if you carry on like this.

There are schools where a teacher can say what he thinks.

But what if you're wrong? Maybe Amnesty's figures were exaggerated? The CO said there had been seventy fatalities. The majority combatants. I was there, Orli. I saw dozens of civilians killed with my own eyes. I saw our shells tear them to pieces.

I believe you, Ido. I know that your fight is right. I'm not asking you to stop it. All I want is for you to get back to yourself. To get back to teaching. To playing with Itai in the afternoons again. How will we have another child when you're so pre-occupied with this?

15. I poke my head out of the APC. Scan the street through binoculars. On the roof of a building I see a sniper. Robot, this is Coat. Robot, this is Coat. Target Daffodil. Five per minute. Over. The battery fires. A mother and three children appear at the entrance to the building. Get away, you idiot. Grab the children and run. Fast! Robot, this is Coat. Robot, this is Coat. Hold fire. Hold fire. A shell falls beside her. A cloud of dust. The mother tries to rise. She's wounded. Shrapnel has severed an arm. She barely stands. Two of the children are lying on the ground. They're dead. With her one arm, she tries to drag the third, who is crawling on the ground. Robot hold fire! Hold fire!
16. **(To his parents)** On Saturday I came to talk to you. You both sat in silence. I called every day last week, Dad. Why didn't you answer? And yesterday I knocked on the door, Mom. You didn't open. You complained, Dad. The rabbi wouldn't allow me to read from the Torah this morning. I'm responsible that you deserted. I'm responsible that you're a traitor. I want to explain to you what happened there, Dad. No. First you stop swearing and cursing the army. Afterwards you repent and make atonement. No, Dad. First you listen to me. I killed dozens of civilians. I need to be brought to trial. Me and my commanders. And all their commanders. If I sit in prison, you'll have to take care of Orli and Itai. You began crying and walked out, Mom. Look what you've done to her, you screamed, and left after her. **(To his brother)** The next day, I came to you at the hospital, Amir. We spoke in the storeroom. You didn't want anyone to see us together. Have you lost your mind? You were such an outstanding officer and now you want soldiers to refuse orders? Dad is ashamed to leave the house. Mom cries all the time. Her blood pressure has hit the roof. Think of them. Think of Orli and Itai. You can also think about yourself, you know. Will the dead return to life if you sit in jail? Amir, in the Lebanon war I was a soldier with the battery. In the previous Gaza war I

was an officer with the battery. I didn't know what I was firing at. And I didn't want to know. But in Rafah I saw the shells I directed exploding on children. You've treated victims of shelling. You know what they look like. Just then you were called to the operating theater and off you went.

17. I returned home. Every morning I take Itai to kindergarten. On the sidewalk outside our house he sees the protest vigil of reserve soldiers. I explain to them, that I'm not a political person. I've never participated in a demonstration. I didn't even vote in the last elections. My demand that the events of Black Friday be investigated is meant to serve you. You need to know what's allowed and what's forbidden in war. Itai doesn't understand the argument but he feels their anger and pulls my hand to get me away. At some distance from them he bursts out crying. Don't cry, darling. Don't cry. Daddy knows what he's doing.
18. I asked for a meeting with the Defense Minister. He didn't respond. I put up a tent outside his office in Tel Aviv and hung a poster saying: I killed dozens of people in Rafah. I demand to stand trial. Three policemen arrived during the night and removed me, saying that I was disturbing public safety. **(To Orli)** You tried to calm me down. Enough, Ido. Enough. You've done everything. There's nothing more to be done. It's just the beginning, I insisted. What's got into you? You're ready to sacrifice me and Itai just to be proud that your hands are clean? I'm not proud. I'm scared. Of what? In Rafah I saw what sort of person I am. I saw what I'm capable of doing. You are the best person I know. No, Orli, I'm not. You are. But if you insist on sitting in prison, you've probably given up on me. If you don't try to understand what happened to me there, then you've probably given up on me. Enough, Ido. Stop pitying yourself. I'm pitying myself?! The blood of those I killed is still on my hands. They're the ones I pity. I think I'll sleep on the sofa in the living room tonight.
19. The next day you returned from work and locked yourself in the bedroom. I knocked on the door. You didn't answer. I phoned Amnesty in London. In order to trigger a public discourse, they said, we need to bring the brigadier who gave the order to court. If not in Israel then in Europe. Suddenly you opened the door. Have you gone mad? You're handing over the brigadier? The protestors outside will kill you. And me and Itai as well. Go to the Military prosecution. To the state prosecution. Go to the Supreme Court. And what will the Supreme Court say? You'll do whatever they say! I'm not blind, Orli. I can see how much I'm hurting you. But if I don't do it I'll really go mad.
20. Amnesty circulated my testimony among the police head offices in Europe. At the end of December, the brigadier and his family arrived in London on a visit. When he produced his passport at the airport, he was detained on suspicion of committing war crimes. The entire country was in an uproar. The finger was pointed at me and at my letter to *Haaretz*. Hundreds joined the demonstration on the sidewalk. The shouting and screaming were insufferable. I shut myself up in the house. The police posted guards. **(To Orli)** You stopped talking to me. You left in the morning, returned in the evening and didn't even exchange a glance with me.

After about a week the British police invited me to give testimony in London. **(To Orli)** When I began packing, you broke your silence. You're not going there. It's suicide. I'm not prepared to give up on you. I'm not giving up on you either, Orli. As soon as I've testified, this damn war will be over. I swear. If I don't do this, I'll hate myself for the rest of my life. I tried to embrace you. But you punched me hard on the chest. You prefer that I hate you for the rest of my life? That Itai hates you?

21. Amnesty representatives met me at the airport and took me to a London police station. The brigadier was already in the interrogation room. Sitting in front of two officers. He was stunned to see me. Have you come to testify against me? It was probably you who laid this idiotic complaint against me. Are you out of your mind? I've got soldiers on the border. I'm responsible for the security of the entire front. I've got to be back there tomorrow. The English officers tried to calm him down, but his fury just increased. Twenty years I've risked my life for people like you and their families, and you give me in? I'll sit in jail for the rest of my life because of you. For what? Before I could respond, he rushed at me and grabbed me by the neck.

You put me here and you'll get me out. Tell them you take back everything you said. The officers jumped on him and handcuffed him. After a few minutes he regained control of himself. From now on I'm not answering any questions. I demand that the ambassador be brought here. I was sent by the state and the state will defend me.

22. Block the Gaza road, the brigadier screams on the radio. Block it immediately. The battalion hurries north. Open fire, the CO orders. On the road. To stop the kidnappers from escaping. Now. Open fire now. I identify the target on the map. Robot this is Coat. Target Lion 3. Fire. Over. I watch through binoculars, waiting for the first shell. A river of civilians running around in panic. Entire families escaping from the bombed-out neighborhoods. The shell lands precisely on the target. Bodies and body parts fly through the air between the clouds of dust. The river of civilians divides into thin streams flowing down the side roads. Fire. Fire, shouts the CO. Robot this is Coat, I groan. Ten per minute. Fire, Over. A shell lands in the middle of a narrow alley. The blast collapses the walls of the buildings. The dust settles. A stray dog frees itself from the rubble. A woman limps after him. A child after her. She stumbles for a few steps and collapses. Robot, this is Coat. Hold fire. Robot, this is Coat. Hold fire. The CO grabs the mouthpiece from me. Robot, this is Apex. Continue firing. Robot, this is Apex. Continue firing.

23. The next morning, I returned to the police station. The brigadier was sitting silent and sullen opposite the two English officers. I decided to talk to him:

You gave the Hannibal order. You decided on the artillery targets. You knew that we were shelling residential areas. You knew that we were killing civilians. And you ordered us to continue. Until today, you have refused to explain why that killing was necessary. You need to explain it now. If your explanation is not sufficient, we will both stand trial here. You for your orders and me for carrying them out. He was unable to restrain himself.

Who does my explanation have to satisfy?! These anti-Semites? You?! My orders were approved by the Division CO, by the CO of the southern command, by the Chief of Staff and by the Defense Minister. Only to them do I owe an explanation. Then he lapsed into silence. The officers ordered him to return to his cell. As he was leaving, he stopped at the door. I know that they are recording and translating every word. I know they will use it against me. But I have nothing to hide. I knew that we were destroying homes and killing civilians. I also knew that the kidnapped officer was already dead. We had a double objective. To rescue his body and, most of all, to achieve deterrence. Anybody who abducts a soldier of ours has to know that the price is very high. Now all the Arabs know it. That's why they haven't tried to kidnap a single soldier since then. You can quote me. I'll say it proudly at my trial.

You were waiting for me at the airport when I returned to Israel. You embraced me and cried. It's over, Orli. My war has ended. It's enough for me that the brigadier will stand trial. He won't stand trial. Haven't you heard the news? The prime minister demanded from the British government that he be released. What?! He's returning tomorrow.

Fine. I promised and I'll stick to it. I give up.

You looked at me for a long moment:

From now on you don't speak about Rafah. You don't think about it either. And tonight you come back to our bed. Of course, I said, and I hugged you. And we're going to try have another child. We'll have another child. We will.

As we were parking outside the house a police car approached. An officer and two policemen got out. Ido Biton? You're under arrest.

For what?

For the unauthorized disclosure of confidential information.

24. I was taken for questioning immediately, but the storm didn't die down. Every day, hundreds more people joined the character assassination. I was declared a coward. A deserter. A collaborator. A traitor. The voices seeped into the interrogation room.

If you acknowledge what you did and repent, you'll be released and return home, the interrogators promised. And how will I live here after this character assassination? How will I teach? How will I educate? Only a trial will clear me.

25. **(To his parents)** And then you two visited. You brought mom's couscous and a drawing by Itai. You've got to reach a plea bargain, you said. A plea bargain?! How do you know they've offered one? You began stuttering. Who sent you, dad? You didn't answer. The brigadier? You stayed silent. You answered in his place, mom. His mother came to us and asked us to talk to you. So you immediately hurried over here? Five months I've been begging you and you haven't even tried to listen to me. If you don't stand with me, they'll grind me into dust. Suddenly dad started to cry. He's one of us, Ido. He's one of us.

26. After you left, I informed the interrogators that I would deny all the allegations against me, decline the services of an attorney and defend myself at trial. At midnight, the brigadier walked in. He indicated to the interrogators to leave the room and sat down opposite me:

Biton, I can get you out of here tomorrow morning, without a trial and without punishment. You'll go home, to your wife and child. The protest outside your house will disperse. No-one will bother you again.

What do I have to do in return?

Nothing.

What do you mean nothing?

It means that you don't have to do anything. The opposite. You'll be released. Keep a low profile. Be forgotten. In another year or two you'll be able to return to teaching.

And what about the inquiry into what happened.

The inquiry is over.

There has to be an external inquiry. The military investigators knew that they had been appointed to clear the army.

Of course. The report was written to minimize the damage. So the UN wouldn't appoint its own inquiry. Don't be naïve, Biton. So you killed. So what? We all kill. Life is not as precious here as you might think. Many more will yet be killed. Both among us and among them. All those we killed will be forgotten.

But if we pay the price for what we did, fewer will be killed. Among us as well.

The opposite. If we are tried, the soldiers in the next war will be too scared to fight and thousands of them will be killed. If it's what you want, you can sit in jail for the rest of your life.

And you think I'll be silent there?

We have many ways to shut you up.

27. Two days later, I received the indictment. The prosecution requested that I remain in custody for the duration of the trial. **(To Orli)** You visited me that day. You already knew about my conversation with the brigadier. I can't carry on like this, Ido. Neither can Itai. He's wetting his bed. Crying all the time. I'll be out in a few days, Orli. A few days?! You'll spend ten years in jail! You don't believe I'll win the trial? And if you don't? Of course I'll win. Ido, if you don't accept the brigadier's proposal, then... Then what? Then what?! Then I don't think I'll be visiting you in the near future. It was when you left that I began to die.
28. The next day I was transported to the court, my wrists and ankles shackled. **(To his parents and brother)** You weren't there, of course. I didn't think you would be.

29. Dozens of furious citizens were waiting at the back entrance to the court. They were shouting: Son of a bitch. Give him the death sentence. Filth. Piece of shit. They assaulted me as I got down from the prison van, punching and kicking. The prison guards forced a passage through them. While being shoved and kicked, I felt a light prick in the back of my thigh. What was it? I entered the lobby.
30. The court was packed. Reservists. Retired officers. The families of fallen soldiers. The air was dense with their hatred. I looked for you again and again in the crowd. Whenever the door opened, I hoped you had arrived. The judge read out the indictment and turned to me: The disclosure of confidential information is a serious offense, Mr. Biton. I again advise you to use the services of an attorney.

Your honor, I don't need an attorney. I will defend myself using my natural sense of justice. We shouldn't have killed one-hundred-and-seventy civilians. We shouldn't have wounded six-hundred people, elderly, women children ...

The crowd erupted in boos. You will get your chance to speak later, the judge admonished me.

Suddenly I began feeling dizzy. I held onto the dock and continued: Your honor, most of the soldiers in the battalion saw our shells fall on the houses... on the streets... on the stalls in the market... If only one or two others had spoken up, I would never have gone to London to testify...

My dizziness was getting worse and worse. The cursing and threats also got worse. Again, I looked for you in the crowd.

Your honor, even the pilots who bombed... they never saw the dead bodies with their own eyes... but they knew how many they killed... how many they injured... they knew and they stayed silent... I had no option... If I'm the only one prepared to speak out, then I must speak out...

The judge saw that I was about to collapse and ordered me to sit. He continued to speak. His lips moved, but I couldn't hear his voice. A choking sensation began to rise up my throat. Suddenly I understood. The prick in my thigh. Yes. It's that light prick. Who was it? Why? How much time do I have left? A minute? Half a minute? Where are you? Where are you? I have to see you. Suddenly, I saw the brigadier sitting in the last row. Our eyes met. He lowered his gaze. The judge again silenced the crowd. I turned to them with my last grain of strength: I wanted to believe that if only you had been there... if you had been there and you had seen... someone amongst you would have demanded that the firing stop... the shelling... the killing... I wanted to believe that if you had been there, one of you would have objected... would have protested... a massacre is a massacre... but now... when I see your hatred... I'm not so sure... maybe I was mistaken... I probably deceived myself... If you had been there, you would also have stayed silent... You would have killed and stayed silent... **(His throat chokes up).**

31. The judge ordered that I be rushed to hospital. **(To the family)** I hope they notified you in time to part from me. I don't know if you came. **(To Orli)** I don't know if you brought Itai. My death was pronounced that same night. The coroners decided that I had heart failure. They didn't notice, or didn't want to notice, the prick in the thigh. Whoever injected me with the deadly poison was able to silence me without anyone knowing. Apparently the truth was too much for him to hear. **(Silence)** It's a pity I had to die to tell it to you.

THE END