

## Yishai Sarid: Limassol | Reading

I drove south beneath the orange lights of the freeway. The window was open and the wind whipped hard. I turned on the blue siren on the roof, went through red lights, hurried to get there. Somebody was waiting for me to visit him.

The night guard at the installation knew me, opened the gate, said good evening, asked if I had seen the championship game, they tied with Slovakia, apparently didn't get to the world championship this time either. I bummed a cigarette from him and parked the car inside, next to the iron gate of the interrogation building. I stood outside and smoked. Above me, beams from the spotlights notched the dark. The air smelled salty. Maybe I'd take the child to the sea at Ashkelon, they say the sea is much cleaner there than in Tel Aviv.

I punched in the code and the gate of the installation buzzed open. The British had erected the building in straight, functional lines, with thick concrete walls and big cellars. We made the renovations demanded by technological advances. There was always a smell of shit in the air, despite the disinfectants. I went down the steps until I found the young interrogator who had destroyed my marriage.

"I'm sorry I bothered you on your night off," he greeted me. "But you wanted me to keep you up to date. I couldn't get anywhere with him. He's stubborn as a mule." He had the face of a mechanical engineer, that interrogator, without a trace of sophistication; he didn't have a drop of the poet in him.

"Where is he now?"

"I sent him to the cell, he's sitting there on a stool."

"Ask them to bring him," I said.

The cells were on the bottommost floor, the one the young people call "hell." For twelve years I had been in that business, and hadn't gone down there myself even once. A few soldiers with a low IQ did the hauling for us, and between one thing and another, would lie outside the interrogation rooms like bored Rottweilers, waiting to be called.

In the interrogation room, there was a standard metal desk, a chair for the detainee, a light with a shade full of insect cadavers. Tape recorders were concealed in the wall; there was no window and the air-conditioner was old and rattled. Sometimes you turned it off to hear what the detainee was saying. A single faded poster of wild animals of the Land of Israel was hung on the wall; nobody had the guts to take it down.

The detainee was shoved, blinking, into the room. Downstairs, it was dark. He was a fat fellow with a black beard. They sat him down on the chair with his hands cuffed in back. I offered him water, as I always did at

the beginning of the interrogation; they'd always drink. When somebody is thirsty, he doesn't think he'll have to pee in his pants afterward. I asked them to take off his handcuffs. It's better like that, now the two of us are free human beings.

I called him by his nickname, the name of his oldest son. I never went into the interrogation room without reading the file beforehand. I asked how he felt. He drank the water and mumbled something. "What do you say?"

"Hurts a little," he mumbled in Arabic. "I don't feel good."

I said I wanted to send him home, if he'd just tell us where his brother was.

He mumbled into his beard, it was very hard to understand him. There were interrogators who sat with interpreters at their side because they weren't sure enough of their Arabic. I didn't. I learned Arabic in school, afterward I used it in the army for four years, at the university I took courses in the history of the Middle East, and for more than ten years I've been speaking it with the detainees. My Arabic became more and more primitive, the Arabic of the barricades, of simple questions, where and when, why, what did you do there, snarls of monkeys. I didn't have time to read anything worthwhile. I barely understood that fat fellow, he swallowed words.

I took a deep breath, as if nothing was urgent for us, even though his brother was wandering around outside with a corset of nails and steel balls. "How old are you?" I asked, even though I knew the answer.

"Thirty-three." He looked much older, probably from all the baklava and ground lamb.

"And how old is your brother?"

"What brother?" he played innocent, and raised his defiant eyes a little.

"Meroan," I called him by name. "The one who disappeared."

"Oh, he's going on nineteen."

"And where did he go?"

"I really don't know. Maybe to look for work."

The young man was sitting next to me, as if he were at a job interview. His fingers drummed nervously on the table. I was awfully tired, and didn't know how to proceed with the detainee. I tried a direction.

"You love your brother Meroan?" I asked.

"Yes. Love."

"And you don't care that he's going to blow himself up?"

He bowed his head and I saw that his lips were stretched into a smile he couldn't repress.

"You know what happens when a person blows himself up?" I asked. "First of all his head flies into the air like a ball, but the eyes go on seeing for a few more seconds. Can you imagine how scary that is? And then all the internal organs are smeared all around, and the prick flies to hell. Have you ever thought of how such a performance looks?"

He sank into himself. His fingers rolled an imaginary chain of prayer beads and his mouth mumbled chapters of the Koran.

I came close to him. I wanted to attract his attention, so he'd be full of me and what I was telling him. At a certain point, you've got to take up the whole stage.

"That's how concerned you are for your brother?" I whispered to him. "That's how concerned you are for your little brother? What kind of a person are you?"

"Maybe he's scared of what will happen to his brother when they catch him," the young man played the good cop, with a kind of clumsiness that angered me.

"We'll save him," I said into his plump ear. "He'll go to jail for four or five years, get three meals a day, and then he'll go back home. Maybe they'll kidnap some soldier and he'll get out sooner."

My underarms and back were sweating, my shirt was soaked. My detainee was wearing a long black garment, and with the whole beard and the heavy clothing he didn't look as hot as I did. You're a chatterbox, I said to myself, you're entertaining him.

"Did you spend a lot of time together when he was little?" I asked.

He mumbled something again. On his forehead he had those black spots of orthodox worshippers who knock their head on the floor. If you were him, would you inform on your brother who was going to be killed as a martyr? I asked myself.

“What do you love most about him, your brother Meroan?” I asked, and I thought about my child who was vomiting and hadn’t fallen asleep tonight. He asks where you are, Sigi said in a café before the play. He needs you. I felt uneasy.

I asked the young man to bring me black coffee. “Can I leave you alone with him?” he answered in a whisper, because it was against procedure.

“No problem,” I said. “His legs are bound. He’s not going anywhere.”

The young man left. I switched off the tape recorder under the table; afterward, I could claim it was a technical screw-up. I moved right on top of the detainee, and stood over him. I had an image of taking out my prick and pissing on him. At that moment, I had no respect for that man, for me he was a fat box concealing a secret that could kill me.

“Listen to me carefully,” I said in the most proper Arabic I could come up with. “I will kill you tonight if you don’t tell me where your brother is. You won’t get to see the light of morning or your wife and children. Listen to me.” I grabbed his shirt collar and tightened my grip. “You’ve got to talk to me, or you’ll die. You’ve got to believe me.”

He looked into my eyes furtively and checked me out. His speech was heavy, but his look was intelligent, discerning. I didn’t scare him enough, so I had to start hurting him. The slap was harder than I had planned, it stunned him, and then he tried to raise his hands to protect himself, and, still sitting, he got a kick in the stomach. All that was nonsense, as opposed to guts, spilled on pavement. Everything’s fine until the wounds are torn open again and organs spill out. The young man came back with the coffee and saw immediately what had happened, understood that I had moved on to the next stage. “No choice, eh?”

He whispered to me. “I hope you turned off the tape recorder.”

The young man cuffed the detainee’s hands to the chair, in a position that arched his back, and I started talking again. “I’ll let you go as soon as you say where he is. Do a good Muslim deed. Save your brother, save yourself. Nobody will know you talked. We arrested thirty men to find your brother. Nobody will know it was you.”

We left him sitting like that until signs of suffering were seen on his face. In those moments, you want to release them, give them something to drink, maybe they’ll be grateful and will talk. But that’s a mistake. Now they’re only full of awful hatred.

“How many children do you have?” I asked.

“Four,” he mumbled. Now sweat was streaming from his forehead. At long last, he felt he was in trouble.

“You want to leave them without a father?” I asked. I had to get into that man’s head. Blows won’t help crack him, he fled to another world, to places where God was with him, where I couldn’t get to at all.

“Why are you mad at us?” I asked, and he smiled again. The young man pushed his shoulder, without permission from me, and got a groan of pain from him. “I’m the only one who touches him,” I said.

The young man came close to me and whispered in my ear: “Sorry, but outside, everybody’s hysterical. There’s information that he’s walking around now with the load, that they’ll bring him in tonight, but they don’t know who. We’ve got to get it out of him.”

Maybe a stick up the ass would do the job now, maybe an electric shock and rats as in South America in the good old days, but I only had my hands and a bag and handcuffs. I didn’t have time to dry him out in the cellar. He had to start talking now. My cell phone started jumping in my pocket and when I looked I saw that Sigi was calling.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to the young man and went out a moment.

Sigi was crying on the line. Precious time passed until I got her to say that she hadn’t slept all night, the child was vomiting and had a fever. “Now he’s sleeping?” I asked.

“Now he’s sleeping. But that’s not why I’m crying,” she went on crying, I barely understood what she said.

“Fine, if it’s not urgent, let’s talk later.”

Now I felt pressure in my chest.

“When will you come?” she asked.

“As soon as I finish here.” I opened the door of the interrogation room.

“And when will that be?”

When we catch the man who's planning to blow himself up," I said. I snapped the phone closed and went inside.

I dragged the chair very close to him, breathed his smell, put my face close to him, searched his eyes. "Come on, let's save your brother together," I said. "Help me." And he shook his head hard. He was made of unbreakable material, and even if you chopped him up into pieces, he wouldn't turn into a traitor.

"We're going to bring your wife now," I said. "You know where we'll put her? In a cell with men, rapists and perverts, they're waiting for her there, we bring them a fresh shipment every week. You think I'm joking? You think Jews don't do such things? They do, they do. We've become pigs just like you." I was ashamed of myself, the words coming out of my mouth disgusted me. That detainee was a noble man compared to me. If I'm ever in his situation, I hope I'll have the strength to act just like him.

I signaled to the young man and he tightened the handcuffs even more, and now the detainee was completely twisted back like a bow, his belly remained in front as if it were separate from his body, and a stain of urine spread on his trousers. A real elegant interrogation, I said to myself. I let him dry out like that for a few minutes while I went out to call Sigi, but she didn't answer.