

A Stain

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He lies there, a thick red liquid pours out of him from different directions, Muki the regimental doctor bends over him, his skilful hands are busy everywhere, one hand injects something into the vein, the other hand lifts the head and raises the chin, next to him Oren the medic does what Muki shows and tells him to do, I stand and look at the one who's bleeding, I don't hear the words they are saying to each other, their lips move in forceful, unceremonious whispers, my ears are sealed, maybe because of the horrible noise of the helicopter blades, maybe because of the thunder of the grenades that exploded not long ago beating my eardrums, the bullet-proof vest weighs heavily on me, I feel pressure in my chest, vague weight, from the shrinking rigidity of my body, of my lungs, I hear heavy breathing, slow, whistling, I realize that this is my own breath, it reaches my ears from far away, I was already cold in the jeep when we were on our way to the helicopter pad, it was probably frightening there but I only thought about the cold that freezes my shoulder blades, because of him, that one that lies there bleeding, we had to make this dangerous short-cut and cross Khan Yunis through the Casbah in total violation of regular orders, but this time the Brigade Commander approved, or more correctly issued a command, it's the fault of the one who's bleeding, it would have been better if he were dead, for all of us it would have been better, actually for Eitan and Yuval it is already too late in any case, for the last hour I've been constantly memorizing the features of Yuval's face, over here are the honey-colored freckles especially those that are grouped on the mounds of his cheeks beneath his brown eyes, and over here are the freckles that spot his button nose, over here are the freckles that look as if they extend along his childlike smile, but Eitan, I simply can't remember his features, I must remember and draw myself his eyes, the area of his temples, the outline of his chin that extends up to his ears, the lines of his lips, I only remember intensity, and kind understanding in the arch of his tolerant brows, I do not manage more than that, it's easier for me with Yuval, probably because he's a redhead, the freckles are like landmarks on his face leading me to all of his features, according to them I'm now diligently memorizing the other corners and

angles of his features, only an hour ago I sat with Eitan on the big rock at the side of the road and we planned our route, we sat on the big rock in the southern sun, he took out the map with a an agile movement, patiently showed me the planned route and the directions, made sure that I was able to follow, I looked at him and the whole time I thought how he has covered for me since basic training and never got sick of it, I felt how the sun was burning me, I listened to his voice with its quiet and restraint, I saw how he assumes command so naturally, before he took out the map, we prepared strong Turkish coffee with the grandmothers that sit near the Erez roadblock, we always stop there and pamper ourselves a little with black Turkish coffee and cake, I enjoy their anxious glances, the caressing touch of their hands patting my shoulder, my hair, the way they say: eat boy, how come you are so skinny, doesn't your mother ever feed you? my heart fills, I simply must recall his face now, his eyes, otherwise I'll go crazy, the noise of the helicopter blades deafens my ears, Muki the regimental doctor shouts something to me in the middle of the noise, I can't hear Muki, I approach, what does he want from me, I have no idea, I reach him, Eyal, get the commander on the radio, tell him--departure in five minutes maximum, OK I say, suddenly I notice that the bleeding one is coughing and spitting in all directions like a sprinkler, red spit, Muki gets some of it, I manage to avoid it, the co-pilot returns I think that his name is Ofir, I hear myself say to him suddenly, out of the blue, with no connection to anything, boy, neat outfit, his overalls look clean and beautifully pressed as if they just slid out from under his mother's iron, he looks at me, suddenly he gets it from the sprinkler of the bleeding one, straight on his spotless pants, but he doesn't notice, I shout to him in a whistling voice, you've just been sprayed by the sprinkler, look at your left pants leg, he looks down at his pants and I see the anger rising and swelling his veins, filling his neck with a ruddy warmth, he curses, looks in all directions, curses again, probably searching for a handkerchief or something to remove that color with, his movements are too quick and fragmented, he picks up all kinds of bags that lie on the sides of the sprinkler's stretcher, throws them, crosses above to the other side of the stretcher in one wide step, lifts a backpack, opens it, rummages, rummages, curses, throws the pack on the floor, Eitan's eyes refuse to come back to me, I feel that I'm losing my mind, I want to go off to the side for a moment and let out all the frustration, away from me, like blood, pour it out, I can't seem to budge from my place, the cold freezes my shoulder blades, the whistling breath seems far from me, I'd better use my inhaler before I have an attack, but it's somewhere in the pack on my back, far, far away from me, I told Eitan about the asthma, I managed to hide it completely from the others, they would never have

let me come here, only an hour ago me and Eitan, on the rock, in the sun ...Muki, the doctor, yells at me, again, this noise, I don't hear a thing, he's starting to come closer to me, suddenly I understand from his angry voice, he wants to know why I don't move and call the brigade commander, it's urgent that I get a move on, I want to explain to him that I've lost Eitan's face and that I must remember it, and that I have a special and sacred duty to remember it otherwise I'll never be forgiven, and that strangely enough, I have no problem remembering Yuval's freckles, but meanwhile Muki's face is already very close above the bleeding one, he and Oren the medic are bending over him like two compassionate, diligent nurses, fulfilling his every need, they cover him with two thick woolen blankets, inject him with all kinds of life-prolonging drugs, connect him to an I.V. that restores lost fluids to a living body, hold damp cotton and clean the blood from his hand, afterwards I see how they absorb the blood from his mouth, wipe away the blood near his lips, near his nose, my own nose is still choked with the smell of Itzik the sergeant's bullet shots, he rode with me in the jeep behind Yuval and Eitan's jeep, Kobi the driver was with us too, about ten meters maybe a little more separated me from Eitan's jeep, I saw everything, Itzik's face suddenly became filled with the most terrible anger that I had ever seen in my life, he held his weapon ready and screamed at Kobi the driver to catch up to the gray Subaru, the car from which the grenades flew a few minutes ago straight to the vulnerable underbelly of Yuval and Eitan's jeep, blowing them to bits, it's not clear how we came out of it in one piece, Kobi flew like a missile after the Subaru, I didn't see a thing, the air whistled in my ears and all kinds of colors spun around in front of my eyes, I didn't even have a chance to be scared and right away Itzik stormed them, I heard him empty two whole magazines before they understood that they were done for in this world and going to go up like martyrs to the Garden of Eden and meet beauties that are promised to every Shahid, I climbed down from the jeep after Itzik, the thunder of the shots echoed in my ears, we reached the Subaru, I smelled the strong smell of gunpowder, before then, I heard cries of pain, afterwards it was quiet, but when I drew near after Itzik, again I heard a weak voice, Itzik shouted to me to bend down and aimed his weapon, but suddenly he told me it's nothing, it's some nobody dying, I got closer and saw the bleeding one lying, his eyes open, his mouth full of blood, Itzik raised the weapon and aimed at the head, his finger was already on the trigger, suddenly I heard my voice coming out of some low place in the chest, not passing through my mouth, penetrating the air with a hoarse noise, I said, wait a minute, what are the procedures, what are the procedures, I didn't say wait a minute, stop, don't shoot, it's a live human being, I didn't say shoot, put

him to death like he put others to death, I only said wait a minute what are the procedures, what are the procedures, but Itzik put down his weapon, looked at me and said, OK, he went to the bleeding one and took out the documents he had on him, the bleeding one cursed something in a weak voice, Itzik aimed the weapon at him but it was clear to me that he didn't intend to shoot, OK, so get the Brigade Commander on the radio right away and let me talk to him, after he spoke to the Commander I heard him read the particulars of the bleeding one out loud, after a few minutes the Commander got back to Itzik on the radio, I saw Itzik's face change, become serious, then he said to me, hey, this one is high up on the wanted list, this nothing, the Commander ordered, we must keep him alive, we've got to do a short-cut through the Casbah, the helicopter will wait for us on the pad of Khan Yunis, Muki the doctor will wait for us there too, he said that we must keep him alive, this one is high up on the wanted list, you hear me? I saw the face of the bleeding one listening, I suspect that he understands a little Hebrew, actually after Khan Yunis when we arrived at the pad and Muki the doctor and Oren the medic approached him from the helicopter, suddenly he started to go crazy and cursed the Jews and Israel in Arabic and tried to spit at Muki and Oren who were closest to him, it seemed to me that he would rather die than allow them to treat him, but after going berserk, all at once he became weak and fell totally silent and seemed as if he were already dead, now they are bending down over him like two worried compassionate nurses, fulfilling his every need, covering him with warm woolen blankets, cleaning him up, disinfecting him, and the whole time I see Ofir the co-pilot getting in their way in the helicopter, cursing and turning things over, picking up bags, cursing, throwing them back, then he finds a dirty rag near the chair, starts to rub the colored stain on his left pants leg, rubs it and curses, rubs and curses, throws down the cloth, stops for a minute, takes out a pocketknife, pulls the blade slowly out, waves it in the air in front of his eyes, looks at it, I can't breathe, my breath is whistling, brings the knife down to his left pants leg, starts to scrape the material of his pants, curses, I say things to myself in a small inner voice that is reserved for myself and for my inner space, and at the same time I move my back in tiny rhythmical movements together with my small inner voice, the back moves back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, don't look in his direction, he is nothing to you, back and forth, he's nothing, he's just blood, back and forth, don't look at him at all, back and forth, he's nothing, Eitan's eyes do not return to me, back and forth, back and forth, Yuval's face appears opposite me, his honey-colored freckles jump out in front of my eyes, I just want to stand up and scream at someone but suddenly I understand that Muki the doctor is shouting at me, really shouting, are you

crazy, what's wrong with you, move it, urgent, get the Commander on the radio, we have to coordinate with him, do you hear me you idiot, I move, get the Commander on the radio, my voice leaps past my throat, again, I say something, evidently what Muki told me to say, get an answer, forward the answer to Muki, Muki nods, there's a strange expression on his face that is turned towards me, I am losing Eitan's eyes forever, I am failing my duty, maybe it's the fault of the terrible noise of the helicopter blades, maybe because I hear my own distant breath from far away, it becomes more and more choked, like at the beginning of every attack, or maybe it's my blood pressure that is plummeting as happens to me frequently, and the whistling sounds start in my ears blending in with outside noises, I notice that the bleeding one has started to make noises again, Muki bends over him, checks the I.V., again he verifies the correct dosage of life-prolonging drugs injected into the vein, takes cotton and wipes away the blood, afterwards he takes Oren the medic and they both leave the bleeding one alone for a minute, he's nothing, all he has is blood that fills his mouth, sprays out like a sprinkler every time he coughs and sticks to us all, leaving us with a stain that will never be erased, Ofir can't get the stain out, that's what he's been doing all the time, trying to remove the stain and cursing, but even I have been sprayed by the sprinkler and stopped trying to avoid it, suddenly I start to feel my body move slowly in the direction of the bleeding one, I don't know how my feet are taking me in his direction, I don't care any more about the red sprinkler that sprays occasionally in every direction, let me also be covered with blood, I don't have strength any more to run away, I stand close to him and open my eyes, I see him lying, covered with two woolen blankets, I see his face, the thick black beard, I look at his shut eyes, a young man, my age, I see the I.V. that is connected to his arm, I see the thin trickle of blood in the corner of his mouth, I look at my own clothes and see bloodstains, his, mine, I don't know, I don't care anymore, I feel my chest filling up with lead, the cold that freezes my shoulder blades returns to my memory like the smell of death that hovers here in the air, the sound of labored breathing passes vertically from my lungs and rises to my ears forcing my attention, the vest weighs heavily on me again, I see Eitan's eyes, dark green, under eyebrows arched with understanding, they've finally come back to me, I enfold them deep within my own eyes, I embrace them and hold them tight to me as if they had returned from a long journey, and fulfill my sacred duty.