

The Morning Bus to Calvary ©

by Yosef Bar-On

The soldier lay shivering, wrapped tightly in the four thin and muddy issue blankets. The dampness seeped through and his hip ached. He was worried about catching cold again; he had had a cold several times that winter. His Mauser rifle with its swastika-stamped barrel lay alongside the muddied blankets on the rain soaked Galilean soil. The walkie-talkie was underneath the blankets. He hoped that the moisture hadn't ruined it. He had no watch but he knew that it was close to dawn because the sky had begun to glow with the kind of light that sometimes comes early on foggy winter days. A blurry, inchoate glimmering in which one cannot tell when day begins, night ends or where earth ends and sky begins.

The only sounds were of droplets of dew falling from the sparse leaves of the thorny bushes on the hillside around him. The fog thickened slowly and everything seemed padded in a sort of cotton wool. Slowly a feeling of dread engulfed him, like the fog. He somehow felt that everything would always stay like this from now on and nothing would ever happen again. He shook his head and sighed deeply. Then a bird called and the thoughtless, carefree sound released him from his dismay.

He had come to the country with his family only a year or so ago and had been called up for his service and had just finished basic training. He had never heard of such things as army maneuvers in the mountain village in Tunisia where he had been born. Before his induction into this army his only memories of anything military were of the day the Germans had been driven out of the village and of the ripped stinking body of a dead Afrika Korps infantryman he and his playmates had found in the alley near the wells.

He had had almost no schooling. His platoon sergeant knew this and had carefully explained what an army exercise was and what his particular part in it job was. It was really very simple: all he had to do was settle down right here on this hillside facing the gorge and the footbridge across from the Arab village and just prevent the Arabs from crossing that foot bridge for the next four days. That's all he was told— after all he spoke Arabic and so he shouldn't have any problems with that. They weren't to cross, the sergeant told him, so that they wouldn't be able to steal any stray ammunition or equipment or dud shells and maybe get killed and of course so that they wouldn't see which units or armor were involved. What the sergeant hadn't spelled out for him was how exactly he was to prevent the Arabs from crossing that narrow footbridge.

The sky was now a pale smoky grey and he was beginning to be able to discern shapes and forms. He could make out the end of the footbridge and nearby a dying carob tree, its leaves a dull green circle under a crown of dead blue branches. There were swirling grey streams of quiet ground fog coming up from the gorge. There were still no sounds, and he fancied that he could hear silence. It reminded him of the far off sea sounds in a conch he had once bought from a traveling peddler. He could smell wood smoke and goat dung from the village across the gorge. Suddenly a donkey's harsh, ridiculous braying split the silence and he felt at home. His childhood had been full of animals and fire and smells.

Now the contours of the village appeared. Rough jagged lines, stone and adobe houses creeping up the hillside, here and there the black-garbed anonymity of a woman going about tending her oven, blue lines of laundry connecting stone and mud huts. The thin whistling of a goatherd, leading out

a long line of slowly moving black dots. Four bullocks lazily grazed at the edge of a freshly plowed black field strewn with large white stones. Morning.

The soldier stiffened. From the center of the village and towards the bridge some Arabs came riding single-file on heavily laden donkeys. He hurriedly picked up his rifle; this is what he had been afraid of. His platoon-sergeant's orders came to mind. He was terrified by the platoon-sergeant's wrath; of what he might shout in half-understood Hebrew. The line of Arabs came closer and he was able to make them out clearly. Thirteen men mounted on small donkeys so heavily encumbered that they seemed little more than thin pencil legs, sharp ears and hairy twitching noses.

They reached the bridge and began one by one to cross it. The donkeys with their careful, not to be rushed grace stepped delicately along the footpath, their heads downcast, shaking their ears to chase flies. The men rode comfortably sidesaddle, now and then lightly tapping the donkeys' flanks with their heels. One rider sang snatches of a pleasantly monotonic eastern melody.

It all seemed solid but slightly unreal, the men, the donkeys and the rocky village. They reached the end of the bridge, the entrance to the military zone. The soldier sighed and stood up. He shouldered his rifle and called out, 'Halt!'

The Arabs stopped and looked at the soldier. He wasn't at all sure what to do. He bit his lip then he walked up to the first mounted Arab. In his Tunisian Arabic, imperfectly understood by these Galilean Arabs, he told them to turn back to their village.

For a moment no one spoke and then the first man in the group cleared his throat and said, looking at the soldier, 'We are sorry, sir. But we must get to the main road and catch the morning bus for Jerusalem which leaves very early from Jish.'

'What is this?' the soldier asked himself. The whole setting; the somber mountains in the blue distance, the quiet group of Arabs so different from any he remembered from his home village seemed skewed, disturbing him greatly. The strangely decisive yet diffident statement of the first Arab confused him. The Arab was a big and burly man with dark brown eyes and a warm polished face like a well-made chair rubbed by use and time.

The orders were explicit: he was to prevent men like these from entering the military zone. They apparently were adamant and weren't going to obey him and he most certainly wasn't going to shoot them. He shook his head and, stepping back to his bed roll, he lifted the small walkie-talkie from beneath it and called in, asking for his commander. He disliked his commander, a violently red-headed and freckled young subaltern who appeared to have gone directly from school into the army and officer's training and then into command without ever having experienced an independent, introspective thought. The soldier instinctively feared what seemed to be his commander's immature and insecure roughness. He avoided him as much as possible and now he felt foolish trying to explain, in military radio-talk, his own vague sense of foreboding to this abrupt impatient officer. His hesitant and limited Hebrew was no match for the officer's patronizingly humorous remarks that all the soldier really wanted was to get out of the rain—especially since, after all, there was some truth in that.

The officer was speaking from the operations room of the local area command. It was in a bleak lemon-yellow concrete fortress built in the colonial fashion by the British many years before. Even now it was possible to discern a barely legible sign above the doorway to the operations room, preserved faintly under years of whitewash, HM FORCES NAAFI. The room itself, filled with long tables, typewriters and files was large and untidy. The walls were covered by acetated maps and charts. The officer put down the handset and stared at a large multicolored placard showing the specifications of soviet armor used by the Syrian army. It was raining again and he didn't want to

leave the warm room nor the buxom girl soldier slowly typing out a report with whom he had been enjoying a mild rainy day flirtation. But there had been something disquieting in the soldier's story, or maybe just in his tone. The subaltern considered the soldier to be stupid and perhaps even retarded. Like many unimaginative people he was incapable of gauging the intelligence of anyone forced to use the baby talk of a newly learned language. It was time anyway, to make his rounds of all the outposts. He got up, sighed, loaded his weapon and put on his hooded coat and his web belting. He called out to the motor sergeant to assign a weapons carrier and driver and went out into the rain.

The weather was dismal. Rain fell lightly from low grey-blue racing clouds and shrieking winds cut through their heavy clothes in the open vehicle. Drops of cold rain slid off their steel helmets and soaked slowly into their coats. The weapons carrier splashed through large puddles on the deserted mountain road and then turned off onto a greasily muddy dirt path. It fish-tailed from side to side, forcing the two soldiers to grasp tightly onto the cold metal struts. The driver forced it into a whining four-wheel drive up a steep slippery hill. They reached the bare rocky summit. The weapons carrier could go no further. The officer would have to scramble from here to the opposite hill top where he could see the soldier and the Arabs looking small and abused in their rain blackened clothes.

It started to pour. The wind stopped, the low clouds slowed down in their race across the sky. In the distance long vertical streaks of rain appeared above the village like charcoal lines in a blurry watercolor. The officer labored down and up the slippery grassy hillsides, breathing heavily until he finally reached the silent group. He stood erect trying to catch his breath and at the same time gain an impression of the villagers. Then in a carefully practiced expressionless voice he called for ID cards and travel permits. The men drew forth from their bundles old worn ID cards and crisp, newly issued and neatly folded travel permits. The officer examined them carefully. They seemed to be in order unfortunately. He gestured to the first Arab.

‘Well, What do you want? Where do you want to go?’

‘To Jerusalem, Ya Siddi.’

‘What for?’

‘Must, Ya Siddi.’

‘Go some other time, the Army is busy now.’

‘Now, Ya Siddi, is the Passover Season.’

‘So? What's that to you?’

‘Must go now, Ya Siddi.’

The rains eased but the yowling winds started up. The officer began to tire of the cat and mouse game he was playing. The natural dignity of these older men mad him feel like a school boy again. He became even more impatient and brusque than he had intended; ending any possibility that the villagers would be allowed to cross the military zone.

‘All right now,’ he said roughly, ‘that’s it. Now get on back to the village before I have the lot of you arrested!’

The villagers stood stolidly. The donkeys, cropping at the dark green grass growing underfoot, yanked at the reins. The first Arab looked impassively at the officer.

‘Ya Siddi,’ he said, ‘We have no choice, tonight is the Passover. We must get to the bus for Jerusalem.’

‘Must, you say?’ the officer stared at the Arabs, ‘Must? Soldier,’ he said, gesturing to the soldier, ‘Connect me with Area Command!’ The soldier worked his radio with stiff half-frozen

fingers and the officer turned to the rest of the villagers, 'I'll show you Must! You're all under arrest for illegal entry into a closed military zone. I'm calling the Border Police, you'll all be in detention before you know it!' Now he was fuming, and grabbed the radio receiver from the soldiers' hands, 'Hello Area Command, Carmi here. Get me the Greens, never mind what for, you'll hear in good time!...Give me the Sergeant Major. Listen I've got a bunch of arabushes here who are trying to give us a hard time and were caught trying to cross the area we closed for the maneuvers. What do you mean what am I making an issue out of it for? This is a clear security violation! Yes. I insist. Yes, yes. Carmi R. 554789, Right. You'll send a truck for them? Ours is off picking up supplies. The coordinate references are, uh, hold it a minute. I'll check...453321766022. Got it? You'll see them on a hill opposite the footbridge; it's on the map. You'll pick them up? OK.'

Without another word or glance he handed the receiver back to the soldier and strode down the hillside to the waiting weapons carrier and drove away.

The group of Arabs stood quietly watching. When they could no longer see the vehicle they went to a grove of olives and carobs growing on the leeward side of the hill. The soldier went with them and when they began to build a fire for tea he slung his rifle and joined them. Without a word they opened a place for him in the circle. They hunkered down around the small fire and warmed their hands on the tiny cups. Nothing was said until the Border Police land rover and lorry came for them.

The villagers obediently climbed aboard the lorry. One of the Arabs turned the donkeys into the direction of the village and whacked several on the rump until they all began to run for home. Then he too joined the others in the lorry. The soldier signed a receipt for the detained villagers and then they drove away. The soldier stood watching the lorry as it meandered down the hillside. He wondered what these Arabs had wanted with the Passover in Jerusalem. What had there been about them that had so unnerved him? He stood watching in the silent light rain until the police lorry and the land rover disappeared into the mist on the road to Nazareth.

The End