Checkpoint

by Omer Friedlander

I still search for Adam's face among the soldiers whenever I come to the checkpoint. Every soldier's uniform reminds me of doing his laundry, when he used to come back from the base on weekends. The dark green spinning and spinning in the machine, the surge of water, the frothing soap, then the sensation of drowning. I can't do laundry now without thinking of Adam. For days after his funeral, I washed his old uniform. I sat and watched it spinning in the machine. When the wash was over, I'd put it in again. I dried his uniform in high heat, again and again, imagined it shrinking until it looked like baby clothes, until it got so small it was all gone. I'm afraid that Adam, spinning around and around in my head, will disappear completely one day.

It's dawn; first light glows orange, simmering beneath the heavy clouds. Leading up to the checkpoint are partial roadblocks, earth mounds, and rubble piles. Construction workers, clothes still dirty from yesterday's shift, are waiting in line to

be searched and checked, crammed into a single tight enclosure. A few women in hijabs shuffle their feet and hold their children's hands tightly. Many of them arrived hours ago, in the middle of the night, due to the long delays that keep them waiting at the crossing point.

The sun is white hot now, and the line is endlessly long and unbearably slow today, filled with men smoking their cigarettes down to the filter, drinking strong coffee, standing under a corrugated tin roof that provides some shade. The gate is shut. Adam was killed four years ago, and still I go to the checkpoint every week. Nothing has changed—things have only gotten worse. An endless cycle of violence. The Nation State Law, settler price-tag retaliations, the demolition of homes and the burning of Palestinian olive groves in the West Bank, every two years or so another war in Gaza.

I've been volunteering at the checkpoint for almost two decades. My job is to document whatever happens. I write reports and take pictures and record videos. I'm here every Sunday for my shift, from five to eight in the morning, making sure the Palestinians aren't mistreated with casual cruelty and that the soldiers and border police are doing their job properly. I know the checkpoint inside and out, all its secrets, down to the very last detail—just as I know Adam's room. All the things he kept hidden in his desk drawer. A pale seashell from Caesarea beach, a deck of old Yu-Gi-Oh! cards, a pack of Marlboro Reds with three cigarettes left, a packet of extra-safe condoms, and one of his milk teeth, wrapped in crumpled tissue paper.

I always have my bulky old video camera with me, a relic of the '90s. When I film the men in their tight-fitting jeans and

knockoff Nikes, they whistle and hold up two fingers, a *V* for victory. Children hide behind their mothers, peeking at my camera. Through my lens, I can see the elderly staring blankly back at me, their wrinkled features etched with countless daily sorrows and humiliations. All the other women volunteers, most of them grandmothers, use their iPhones to document the checkpoint, but I kept my old video camera, since all our memories, our footage of Adam growing up, is there, backed up in three different USBs, but still I wake up in the middle of the night thinking that we have lost it all.

I remember Shaul using the very same camera to film the newborn baby Adam lying on the bed, the quilt from Kathmandu spread out and his tiny body between us, telling him his first bedtime story. We filmed Adam's first bath. We washed him in the sink because he was so small. He was born premature, pink and wrinkled, weighing about as much as a small bag of rice. When he was three years old, he pretended to open up a restaurant. He sat us down in the living room with napkins on our laps and folded paper menus. He recited the specials of the day: pasta Bolognese, mashed potatoes and schnitzel, chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream. *I'll take the pasta Bolognese,* I said, and Shaul ordered mashed potatoes and schnitzel. *We're all out,* Adam said. No matter what we ordered, Adam would somberly shake his head and announce that the kitchen had run out of it. No pasta, no potatoes, no ice cream. I wanted to do the same thing when he turned eighteen, when the army came knocking on our door, I wanted to say, *I'm sorry, we have no boys left for you.*

The soldiers do their job with utmost boredom. The earth is dry and cracked, sparsely covered with withered plants. A

herd of sheep grazes in the yellow grass next to the highway, and the sun is high in the sky, even though it's still early morning. The concrete wall is spray-painted with slogans: DON'T FORGET THE STRUGGLE, TO EXIST IS TO RESIST, and my favorite, MAKE HUMMUS NOT WALLS. The men and women are funneled through a narrow passageway, where they shove and jostle for space, pass the spinning steel turnstiles, go through the metal detectors, and finally they reach the station where jaded soldiers sit behind bulletproof glass and check IDs, matching a picture to a face.

Everyone is waiting for the soldiers to decide to open the gate. Meanwhile some Palestinians purchase coffee and cigarettes from the wandering vendors and hawkers. Tired children are crying, bleary-eyed workers are late for their shifts. A man in a gray hoodie is shouting and waving his hands. He is told to lie down on the ground. A soldier yells out commands in broken Arabic, stumbling over the words like a schoolchild reciting a poem he can't quite remember. The man puts his head to the ground, as if listening for a heartbeat. His hands are cuffed behind his back, and he is led away to the *jora*, the detention area.

"Why are you taking him?" I turn on my camera.

The soldier who leads the farmer away raises a hand to cover his face. "Stop filming! Will you get out of here already?"

"*Yalla, yalla, yalla,* keep it moving," another soldier says, speaking into a megaphone. "This isn't an Airbnb."

He waves to the rest of the people, who stare after the receding figure of the worker. In line, the Palestinians are mostly grim and silent now, knowing that if they argue they might not be able to pass at all. They have families to feed, jobs to go to.

Today it is this worker—tomorrow it will be another. *Yom assal, yom basal.* A honey day, an onion day. One of the children in line, a small boy with a mischievous grin, sticks his tongue out at me. I wonder how long it will take for him to harden, become bitter and angry, how many more humiliating days spent waiting at the checkpoint, being strip-searched or interrogated, until he begins resisting with a group of other boys from his village, throwing rocks at passing settler vehicles, and confronting soldiers with riot gear and tear gas canisters and rubber bullets, until he's hauled off to prison for throwing one stone too many.

Last week a settler kid stuck his tongue out at me, too. I seem to attract this kind of attention from children. I was waiting at an intersection on the way home after my shift at the checkpoint, when I saw a family of settlers in their four-by-four with a FIGHT TERROR, SUPPORT ISRAEL bumper sticker, the husband with a woven kippah, the wife with a *mitpachat* headscarf, their three children peeking through the windows, blond *pe'ot* curls dangling from their cheeks, holding gleaming lollipops and melting Popsicles. One of the kids narrowed his eyes and stuck his tongue, painted purple with Popsicle, out at me. How long until he becomes resentful and inflamed, driving down the highway, his car pelted by stones thrown by Palestinian boys from the side of the road, his father getting out of the vehicle with his M16 and firing an entire magazine into the air for deterrence, how long until the child picks up a gun himself and, vowing revenge, takes the law into his own hands?

One young settler, slightly overweight and tall, with *pe'ot* locks and a scraggly beard, comes from a neighboring village in the Occupied Territories to harass the Palestinians. When-

ever he opens his mouth to scream at them, I catch sight of his buckteeth. He's red-faced and enraged, throwing his hands up in the air. But despite his loud theatrics and intimidations, he's got the quiet, dejected look of someone who used to be the shyest boy in school. He appears to be one of the extremist hilltop youth, No'ar HaGava'ot, living in one of the illegal outposts in the West Bank.

The settler has been eyeing me. I'm conspicuous with my video camera. He steps toward me. "Go work in the kitchen, Arab lover *zona*!"

I've read somewhere that when you're confronted with people you don't particularly like, give them a costume—it will help ease the nerves. I picture the settler in a Tudor monarch's clothes, like those worn in the ridiculous portraits of King Henry VIII, a round wide hat on his head, pinned with ostrich feathers, a puffy collared shirt, a coat lined with white ermine. Somehow this makes me feel slightly better.

"*Arabushim*, this is our land!" yells the Tudor settler. "It's been our land for two thousand years!"

"If you don't keep quiet, you will be removed," says one of the soldiers.

"You love moving us with force, don't you?" says the Tudor settler. "You would move us all and give up the whole land of Israel to the Arabs!"

"I'm not giving up any land to the Arabs," says the same soldier, "but if you don't shut up I'll remove you from here with force."

"We gave the Arabs so much, and still they want more. All they want is to kill us, for Esav hated Yaakov. It's not politics! It's the truth from the Torah."

The soldiers stare. Some of them laugh, but none intervene anymore. Formally, they have given a warning, their job is done, now let the settler talk. The Palestinians, the soldiers, the settler, and me, the middle-aged activist working for the women-only human rights group, mourning her son, the soldier. It would be a wonderful theater production in three acts. Something by Hanoch Levin, staged at the Habima Theater, called *Requiem for a Checkpoint*. It would be violent, obscene, and grimy. All the best Israeli actors from Tel Aviv would play the Palestinians. And we, the audience, would rise from our seats and clap and say how powerful it was, how political yet nuanced, how very *real*. And who would they get to play my Adam? A complex character: a soldier, the son of a left-wing activist, killed in action.

There's a commotion: the soldiers are busy with an old man who has metal in his heart and refuses to go through the detector. The old man keeps pointing at his chest and shaking his head. A young girl's schoolbag is being searched: a fine-toothed comb, a science textbook, and a pencil case decorated with Hello Kitty stickers all spill to the ground. With her ponytail held up by a green scrunchie, the frightened girl clutches her father's hand tightly, knuckles white. The father's face is gaunt, deeply lined with worry, and there are sweat stains under his arms, darkening his short-sleeved FLY EMIRATES shirt.

The soldier doing the security checks eyes him with suspicion. "*Tawaquf*, stop!" Quickly and efficiently, he pats the father down. "Show me your ID."

He searches him, then he motions for the little girl to go through the metal detector. The soldier's eyes travel to my camera, then back to the girl.