

Pumpkinflowers

A SOLDIER'S STORY

Matti Friedman

\B^b\

Biteback Publishing

This edition published in Great Britain in 2016 by
Biteback Publishing Ltd
Westminster Tower
3 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7SP
Copyright © Matti Friedman 2016

Matti Friedman has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

Published by arrangement with Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill,
a division of Workman Publishing Company, Inc., New York

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the publisher's prior permission in writing.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise,
be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in
any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar
condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

The excerpt from John Prine's "Angel from Montgomery"
appears here with the permission of Alfred Music.

Permission to include part of Be'eri Hazak's poem "Lord of the Universe" was granted
by the author's brother, the poet Yehiel Hazak. Translation by the author.

Every reasonable effort has been made to trace copyright holders of
material reproduced in this book, but if any have been inadvertently
overlooked the publishers would be glad to hear from them.

ISBN 978-1-78590-043-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Designed by Steve Godwin
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY



NIGHTS ON THE hill were unusually long. They were inhabited by shadows flitting among boulders, by bushes that assumed human form, by viscous mists that crept in and thickened until all the sentries were blind. Sometimes you took over one of the guard posts, checked your watch an hour later, and found that five minutes had passed.

The enemy specialized in the roadside bomb artfully concealed, in the short barrage, in the rocket threaded through the slit of a guard post. We specialized in waiting. An honest history of this time would consist of several thousand pages of daydreams and disjointed thoughts born of exhaustion and boredom, disrupted only every hundred pages or so by a quick tragedy, and then more waiting.

At night four sentries waited in four guard posts that were never empty. Four crewmen waited in a tank, searching the approaches to the fort. Ambush teams conversed in whispers and passed cookies around in the undergrowth outside, waiting for guerrillas. A pair of soldiers drank coffee from plastic cups in a room of radio sets, waiting for transmissions to come through.

Before the earliest hint of dawn each day someone went around

rousing all of those who weren't awake already. Groggy creatures dropped from triple-decker bunks, struggled into their gear, and snapped helmet straps under chins. Now everyone was supposed to be ready. Lebanon was dark at first, but soon the sky began to pale through the camouflage net. Sometimes first light would reveal that the river valley had filled with clouds, and then the Pumpkin felt like an island fortress in a sea of mist—like the only place in the world, or like a place not of this world at all. There was a mood of purposefulness at that hour, an intensity of connection among us, a kind of inaudible hum that I now understand was the possibility of death; it was exciting, and part of my brain misses it though other parts know better.

This ritual, the opening act of every day, might have been called Morning Alert or some other forgettable military term, with any unnecessary syllable excised. It might have been shortened, as so much of our language was, to an acronym. But for some reason it was never called anything but Readiness with Dawn. The phrase is as strange in the original Hebrew as in the English. This was, in our grim surroundings, a reminder that things need not be merely utilitarian. It was an example of the poetry that you can find even in an army, if you're looking.

The hour of Readiness with Dawn was intended as an antidote to the inevitable relaxing of our senses, a way of whetting the garrison's dulled attention as the day began. It was said this was the guerrillas' preferred time to storm the outpost, but they didn't do that when I was there. I remember standing in the trench as the curtain rose on our surroundings, trying to remember that out

there, invisible, was the enemy, but finding my thoughts wandering instead to the landscape materializing at that moment beyond the coils of wire: cliffs and grassy slopes, villages balanced on the sides of mountains, a river flowing beneath us toward the Mediterranean. Things were so quiet that I believe I could hear the hill talking to me. I'm not sure I could understand then what it was saying. But now I believe it was "What are you doing here?" And also "Why don't you go home?"

That hill is still speaking to me years later. Its voice, to my surprise, has not diminished with the passage of time but has grown louder and more distinct.

This book is about the lives of young people who finished high school and then found themselves in a war—in a forgotten little corner of a forgotten little war, but one that has nonetheless reverberated in our lives and in the life of our country and the world since it ended one night in the first spring of the new century. Anyone looking for the origins of the Middle East of today would do well to look closely at these events.

Part 1 is about a series of incidents beginning in 1994 at the Israeli army outpost we called the Pumpkin, seen through the eyes of a soldier, Avi, who was there before me. Part 2 introduces two civilians, mothers, who helped bring about the unraveling of the military's strategy. Part 3 describes my own time on the hill, and the experiences of several of my friends in the outpost's last days. The final part recounts my return to Lebanon after these events had ended, in an attempt to understand them better.

Readiness with Dawn ended up being a time for contemplation.

Look around: Where are you, and why? Who else is here? Are you ready? Ready for what? So important was this ritual at such an important time in my life that this mode of consciousness became an instinct, the way an infant knows to hold its breath underwater. I still slip into it often. I'm there now.

PUMPKINFLOWERS

Part One

I

AT AN ENCAMPMENT imposed upon the sand near an empty highway, teenagers lined up in a yard. There were perhaps three hundred of them, and in their floppy sunhats they looked like comical green mushrooms sprouting in rows from the tarmac. The conventions of military writing seem to require that they be described from now on as “men.” But this would hardly have applied a few days earlier.

Someone read from a list, and two dozen strangers whose names were called became a platoon of engineers. This, at least, was how one of the military clerks might have explained what had just happened. What had in fact been determined was the course—and, in a few cases, the duration—of their lives. What led them here? The shuffling of forms in distant offices, the nature of their upbringing and youthful motivations, the astonishing progression of their people’s history in the century approaching its end. It didn’t matter now. Some would break and vanish in the coming months, but the rest—from now on their fates were welded to one another and to the hilltop at the center of this story. It was early in the spring of 1994. *Do you have to, do you have to, do you have to let it linger . . .* You remember.

Avi was another figure in a row: shorter than most, more solid

than most, a combative black-eyed flash suggesting he was less obedient than most. What was he doing among the others? He disliked authority and it was mutual, the nature of their relationship traceable to an incident a decade earlier. He and his classmates were to give a little bow during a visit by the president of Israel, Avi refused, his parents were summoned, and he said, I will not bow down. Perhaps he had been paying overly close attention to a book; the incident sounds like it may have been inspired by the character of Mordechai from the book of Esther. He was six or seven at the time.

This sort of thing recurred in subsequent years. He was supposed to be studying in the months leading up to the date of his draft, but one day when he should have been in class his parents found him instead sitting outside with a cigarette in one hand and, in the other, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. He became an individual early. Long before he turned eighteen and was summoned to his three years of military service, he had developed the habit of standing to one side and watching everyone, including himself. Much later some of Avi's friends were able to see what happened to them in those years in the army from a distance, and they grasped their own place in the confusing sweep of events, but none had that ability at the time. Avi did. It didn't make things easier for him.

I didn't know Avi then and might not have liked him if I had. I felt fortunate to discover him now—not only because he experienced many of the incidents that will concern us here, and not only because he is a good example of the kind of person changed or ground up by war, but because I have met enough people by now to know you don't find someone like him often.

Avi was suspicious of institutions like the military, and his

experiences would confirm that these suspicions were justified. He had already decided that he scorned hierarchies and official ideology. He once announced that he was going to move to Ireland one day, and it wasn't clear if he was joking. But he wasn't a shirker. So he stood in a yard that day in unfamiliar clothes, surrounded by unfamiliar faces, and heard his name called.

2

OBSERVING AVI AND the other recruits two decades later, you can see they were on the cusp of something. They were eyeing adulthood and wondering what it would mean, just as now they do the same with middle age, those who are still here. But it wasn't just that. They wrote letters, as we'll see. They had no electronic communication devices. Their world seems so quiet. The army was still very much the old army with old ideas about war, but the war for which Avi was bound was different and augured others to come. The world that day at the desert base was, in other words, the past. For the men selected along with Avi, and for many others, what marks the line between the past and the present, between youth and everything that has happened since, is the hill in Lebanon that we called the Pumpkin.

From the first moment everything was pulling them away from the deserts of Israel's south to the country's northern edge, toward the border with Lebanon and then across. The desert plays here only the role usually allotted it in the ancient stories about this country—an in-between land, a space for preparation.

3

THE ARMY REPLACED the trappings of Avi's former life—jeans, books, sandals, T-shirts with the neck cut off in the Israeli style of those years—with new objects. These included a rifle; boots of stiff red leather; fatigues distributed in unpredictable sizes by harried quartermasters; crates of sharp, glinting golden baubles that were heaped like pirate doubloons but were 5.56 mm bullets. His parents were replaced by sergeants and officers.

The commanders at the desert base had to teach these kids to obey orders, fire their rifles, walk long distances with heavy packs, and then, at the point of collapse, to run. They needed to replace opinions with instincts and demonstrate that physical limits are a matter of will. When the kids failed they needed to be punished by the imposition of a distance to sprint in an impossibly short time and then, having failed to achieve that, made to sprint again and again, not until they succeeded—they could not—but until the grins of the cockier ones slackened and the weaker ones began to snuffle. Medics needed to learn to apply a tourniquet and get an intravenous needle in someone's arm in the dark, machine gunners to clear a

jammed weapon. Radiomen needed to learn the language spoken on the Israeli military frequencies: bullets are “candies,” food is “hot and tasty,” soldiers are “matches.” The fresh eyes of the recruits needed to be dulled into a haggard stare. Their faces needed to lose the softness of childhood and assume, via some alchemy of sunburn, sweat, and responsibility, the definition of adults.

Avi and the others belonged to an infantry brigade with a lovely relic of a name: the Fighting Pioneer Youth. This was not an outfit with any particular reputation for valor in battle. It was famous largely for having a first-rate entertainment troupe in the 1960s, when the army was still investing in song-and-dance routines and comedy sketches. By the time Avi arrived the Fighting Pioneer Youth Entertainment Troupe was a thing of the past, but its hits were classics, and its enduring fame had the effect of making the brigade of that name seem less serious than others.

The Fighting Pioneer Youth tended to be youth who understood that combat service was necessary but were by no means pioneers or enamored with the idea of fighting. The brigade had no warlike slogans or symbols; for an infantry unit, it was unusually humane. The idea was not “death before dishonor,” “no surrender,” or anything like that but rather “let’s get through this.”

Avi got used to sleeping on a cot with other soldiers inches from him on either side, his rifle underneath his head, the thin green mattress keeping his cheek from the cold metal of the gun. The recruits were soon too tired to notice the discomfort, or to dream.

4

“**A. REACHED BASIC** training young, healthy, and innocent.” This is Avi, writing of himself in the third person.

When the sergeant said to do things on time he did, and when the commander ordered everyone to give him 50 push-ups A. was the one who set the pace.

But the danger of innocence is that it gets cracked easily by stupidity and cruelty. And so not much time had passed before A. started thinking that perhaps it was not right that he was the only one who was not late, or that he was the only one who cared when the sergeant threw him a good word. His concern grew when he heard the other members of the platoon saying that the regular punishments of running back and forth were not even punishments for something they had done wrong! They were, instead, a plot by the sergeants—that is, the system—directed against them! A. began thinking about this until he could no longer sleep during the short nights allotted to them. He thought so much that he began to move slowly in the morning himself,

and to run slowly when they were punished. Because all of his faculties were devoted to the problem, he did not notice anything else, and quickly became the slowest and deafest of soldiers. Because one of the commanders would speak to him on occasion and interrupt his thoughts, A. suddenly understood that what they wanted to do was prevent him from thinking. He understood that they were his real enemies! They were the enemies of thought and creativity who wanted to enslave him and turn him into a creature incapable of thought, and willing to obey them.

This thought scared him so badly that he began resisting in any way he could. He started to think and do things his own way. If they gave him a mission, like setting the tables in the dining hall, he would put the cutlery backwards! Or miss on purpose at the firing range!! Now he was a rebel!!! And thus A. fought the system, and to the best of our knowledge he might still be doing so today, somewhere in the time and space of the army . . .

Avi was a difficult recruit. He was also a writer—not a great one yet, but on his way.