

## **You and What Army**

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On my nineteenth birthday, I was lying on a yellowing patch of lawn in front of an army dormitory, waiting to be questioned by the military police. I was dressed in a khaki uniform that was a tad too tight, the button of my pants pressing against the folds of my belly. Around me, girls in uniform were sprawled lazily, chatting and waving away flies. Others had fallen asleep.

It was getting hot. Sweat drew dark rings around my armpits and collected in beads on my upper lip. We'd been here since dawn, since we'd stumbled out of our beds for our morning patrol, to discover that two guns had gone missing. Soon after that, military police officers showed up at our dorms. They stretched bright orange tape at the entrance to our room and declared it a crime scene.

Now, a few hours later, it was a typical Israeli summer day, intensely bright and overexposed. The sky was faded, like a pair of acid washed jeans. I closed my eyes, giving in to the warmth of sun on my eyelids, willing myself to fall asleep. The inside of my eyelids was orange and paper thin.

Slipping into a drowsy haze, I drifted back to my eighteenth birthday. On this day last year my girlfriends and I went to a beach party outside Tel Aviv. The day was warm and breezy, smelling of fish, salt and cocoa butter. I danced barefoot in the sand in a flowing red dress and drank beer. I had just graduated from high school a few days earlier, after three turbulent years. I was nearly expelled twice and had gained the reputation of a teacher's worst nightmare. With high school behind me, the air was sweeter, the beer more intoxicating, the boys better looking.

Back on the lawn, I opened my eyes to look at my surroundings, depressed by the stark comparison. I was nineteen and a soldier, trapped in a hideous outfit on a dreary army base with yellow lawns. It had been seven miserable months since I joined the army, and I had seventeen more to go. This birthday sucked. This was the second worst birthday I'd ever had. The worst one, my tenth, was a month after my father's death.

A dark shadow eclipsed my sun. I squinted and made out a military police officer towering above me. He spat a list of seven digits, like shots fired from an automatic weapon, followed with the rank "private." It was a mysterious jumble, a couple of sevens here and a couple of threes there, stirred with an eight, a nine, and a six. In Hebrew, each one of these digits had the letter *Shin* in it, pronounced like the *sh* in shoot or harsh. I found these *sh* sounds, all huddled closely against each other, offensive to the ear and a struggle for the tongue.

This thoughtless arrangement, which was impossible to memorize, was *my* number. My official army ID. My new name. In a daze, I replied, "Yes?" and then quickly stood up, cleared my throat and saluted. "I mean...officer. Sir."

"Come with me." He turned back on his heels.

I followed him to a dark dormitory room, temporarily converted into a police office. Inside, high-ranking officers in neatly ironed uniforms stared at me grimly. One of them spoke, demanding to know if I'd heard something—anything at all—during the night, if I had an idea who might have stolen the guns, if I'd noticed something suspicious over the past couple of days. "Anything, anything at all," he said, almost pleading. I kept saying no. They stared at me a little longer.

The next day, a military police officer called to summon me to an investigation. I was now a suspect.

The seven months leading to my entanglement with the law were an appropriate prelude. I joined the Israeli Defence Force at eighteen. Saying I ‘joined’ the IDF makes it sound as if I did it on a whim, like taking up tap-dance lessons or signing up for a book club. Really, I had no choice. In Israel, the army service is mandatory, and I lacked the foresight to claim pacifism or insanity to get myself discharged. Somehow, I romanticized the army service. I imagined myself in a small, secluded base in the desert, where I’d meet a cute boy who’d sneak into my tent at night. I dreamt of becoming an instructor in a tough all-male fighters’ unit, like Kelly McGillis in *Top Gun*. I saw myself terrorizing a group of hot men in uniform, watching their perfectly toned bodies gather sweat under my strict command.

Nothing turned out as I had hoped. Our basic training camp was located in a female-only base in the desert, where dust covered my hair and sneaked into my nostrils. We were woken up at four o’clock every morning to a day filled with repetitive drills and gruelling duties. By the end of this month, I could handle a gun: taking it apart and reassembling it within seconds and cleaning it until I could see my reflection in the shiny steel. I had learned to fire an Uzi, and was surprised by the painful impact as it dug into my shoulder with each shot, leaving a purple bruise. I’d learned self-defence and first aid, and discovered that when put on the spot, I could erect a tent in minutes and run for kilometres with a stretcher on my shoulder. I’d realized that I couldn’t charm an officer, that I couldn’t get away with anything and that I *had* to do what I was told. The army and I were all wrong for each other.

After basic training, I’d been posted to a large administrative base in the middle of Tel Aviv, a colourless cluster of concrete buildings, with trees and bushes placed in an orderly fashion. It was a world of serial numbers, strict regulations and abbreviated lingo. For the first

few months I came home every day, locked myself in my room and cried into my pillow. I spent my long daily commute writing sad short stories about unhappy female soldiers. I walked through the base in awe that other soldiers could laugh or enjoy small talk with each other. Sometimes I took off my glasses and wandered blind, hiding in the blur, like a child who puts her hands to her eyes and believes no one can see her. Without my glasses, the base appeared softer, an abstract painting in cool shades of pale grey and khaki green.

In the next few months, I developed a minor overeating disorder, and a childish crush on an aging married officer who showed a fatherly interest in me. I collected a record number of court appearances for breaching army regulations: I neglected to tie my hair in a proper ponytail, untucked my shirt, lost my ID and misplaced my cap.

My nineteenth birthday fell on my weekend watch duties, a monthly duty I dreaded. I had to spend the entire weekend at the base, patrolling the fences with an Uzi, making sure no one tried to break in to, say, steal guns. Unlike civilian workplaces, I couldn't ask to switch shifts and nobody cared that it was my birthday. I arrived in the girls' dorms on a Friday, and settled into the bare narrow room lined with bunk beds. The girls occupying the other beds unzipped backpacks and pulled out lotions and hair sprays, sweets and snacks, Walkmans and fashion magazines. Some changed into lounging clothes, revealing lacy bras and g-strings underneath the khaki.

Noga was the last to arrive. We gasped when we saw each other and fell into each other's arms. Many years earlier, Noga and I had been best friends. I had lost my father in grade four and she had lost hers in grade five. She had four pincher dogs that munched on my feet when I slept over. Her mom used to make figurines out of avocado pits. Noga had that hot soldier look going for her, a look I never mastered. Her cotton uniform was worn out, fitting her bum snugly,

as if it were a perfect pair of jeans. Her button-up shirt offered a glimpse of cleavage that just barely met with army regulations.

I got the top bunk, by a smeared window overlooking Tel Aviv streets. That night, as my birthday officially began, I lay awake and watched cars filled with young partiers on their way to the clubs, arms leaning on windows, cigarette butts flicked out, long hair blowing in the wind. Music blared as they stopped at the light, and then faded away as they sped off. The traffic lights from the nearest intersection cast a tricolour slideshow on our white walls and the whining of sirens sawed through the starless night, sneaking into our dreams.

Early morning, the officers' hollers woke us up for our two-hour watch. I put on my uniform, pulled my Uzi from under the bunk and flung it over my shoulder. Noga reached under the bed for her Uzi. "Guys," she said slowly. "Where is my gun?"

"Oh my God." Another girl patted the space under her bunk with increasing panic. "Mine is gone too."

The next day, after the phone call from the military police, I packed my bag and cheerfully informed my boss that I was a suspect in a gun theft investigation and I must leave everything and go. "I probably won't be back today," I said with a large grin. My boss was a lieutenant colonel with a protruding belly and freckled face whose rank was all he had going for him. I was the worst secretary he'd ever had. I made him terrible coffee, my phone manners were a disgrace, and I typed with one finger and refused to get better at it. He waved me out of his office with a dismissive sigh.

An hour and a half later, I arrived at the military police headquarters. Away from the city, the sky was bigger and bluer and the breeze sifted through the row of cypress trees that lined the

barbwire fence. The investigation room was small and windowless. The two young detectives across the large desk were about my age and seemed to have borrowed their investigating techniques from a *Starsky and Hutch* episode. They paced around the room, shooting questions at me. The girl, a mousy blonde with beady eyes, was playing Bad Cop and the guy, a skinny boy with spiky hair and thick framed glasses—just my type—was Good Cop. Every now and then, they exchanged meaningful glances or scribbled quick notes in my file. I sprawled on the chair in front of them with my legs stretched out, answering their questions with a yawn.

It became less amusing when my finances were brought up. It was clear, even to me, that I had a solid motive. Selling guns would certainly fill the bottomless pit that was my bank account.

“How long have you had an overdraft?” Bad Cop spat out her words. She bent over the desk with both hands planted firmly in front of her in an attempt to intimidate me.

“When was your Visa revoked?” Good Cop leaned against my side of the desk, facing me. His voice was soft and his eyes kind. I gave him a generous smile with my answer, and checked him out as he turned around. An image flashed in my head and I indulged in it for a moment: Good Cop clears the desk with one swift motion, clouding the room with flapping paper. He flings me on the desk, rips my khaki shirt open to reveal a bra much sexier than the one I was actually wearing. My buttons fall to the floor in quick succession, like the shells of an Uzi.

“How exactly are you going to cover your debts?” Bad Cop barked, killing the moment.

I awoke from my fantasy; my smile faded as I stared back at her. I bet her family is well off. I bet her daddy takes care of her debts.

I told them that due to my financial difficulties, I was granted a special permit to work outside the army and that I had an evening job in a little movie theatre that showed foreign films. I didn't tell them I watched every single movie, ate mountains of free buttery popcorn and cried at all the appropriate parts and sometimes at other parts as well. I worked for minimum wage and my pay checks were a few drops of rain to a desert soil. Still, instead of eating free lunch at the base's dining room, I'd take myself out to a nice café in town, order pasta in cream sauce and a chocolate cake for dessert. Outside the base, on a sunny patio surrounded with civilians on their business lunches, I let my hair down, unbuttoned my shirt and pretended I was free.

After a couple of hours, they finally let me go. But over the next few weeks I'd be back several more times. I'd go about my day at the office until *they* called—cold official voices ordering me to appear for an interrogation immediately. The sessions all seemed to blend into one. They repeated the same questions, exchanged the same glances, wrote little notes in my ever-growing file. Sometimes we sat in a different room. Sometimes new officers came to question me. I was bored and let it show, yawning liberally, staring at an imaginary speck of dust on my pants, weaving more hormone-saturated fantasies in my head.

One day, I ran into Noga in the waiting room. She gave me a quick guilty look and I could tell that she was frightened. We didn't talk about it, but we both knew that we would never tell them how we teamed up to commit our very first crime. We were eleven; it was a couple months after Noga's father died. We stole a chocolate bar from the supermarket by our school, then ran to the park and ate it greedily, our hearts racing and our cheeks flushed. We were astonished by how easy it was to fool a store full of adults. We went back a few more times after that, becoming more daring, pushing the boundaries further. We were never caught.

A couple of months into my investigation, I was sitting at a police station in front of an officer with a bushy moustache that begged to be twirled. It was a grey morning in Tel Aviv. Fall had just arrived, heralded by the first rain, a heavy downpour that washed away the summer dust and turned the roads into slippery mirrors. I was wired up to a lie detector, strapped in with two rubber belts over my breast, a few wires attached to my fingers and a big cuff wrapped tightly around my arm. I couldn't help but find it kinky.

We were sitting in a small room in a civilian police station: a maze of long corridors with closed doors, filled with the echoes of dragging feet, clanking of handcuffs and endless phone rings. This officer was a *real* cop, much older than those young army detectives, and not the least impressed by my attitude. As far as he was concerned, I could be a gun thief. Why not me? Who barely finished high school, whose behaviour sheet was littered with regulation breaches, who had been to court nine times in the past year, who clearly lacked money management skills.

“Sit straight,” he barked.

I reluctantly sat up.

“I'm going to ask you a few questions before we start,” he said as he browsed through my file. His voice was tired and monotonous, as though he'd been through this routine a thousand times. “I need to know if you ever stole anything.”

My eyes widened. “Like, ever?”

“Yes.”

I'd been a small-time thief as a kid. I stole books and magazines, candies and cans of pop, the occasional scarf or sunglasses from a large department store. I was good at it too. Never got caught. “Yes, I have stolen things before.”

“Have you ever stolen anything from the army?”

I hated the army, and I was broke. There were pens and papers, the occasional binder and maybe a couple stamps. I told him that. He got mad. “Are you so strapped for money that you have to steal from the army?”

I looked at him blankly, the way people do when they have nothing to lose, and said, “Are you here to perform a test or are you here to question my morals?”

And so we proceeded.

He asked a set of questions to establish my truthful responses. My name, my rank, my age. I watched the needle move erratically as I answered, wishing I was one of those people who could manipulate lie detectors, who had control over their anxiety and perspiration. Then he asked, “Did you ever steal anything from the army except for what you already told me?”

I moved uncomfortably in my chair. What if I forgot something? “I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“This is a yes or no question.”

Hesitation. Could I possibly fail the lie detector test? Could I really be charged with gun theft? Until now, it was all a joke, an entertaining anecdote, a way for me to get out of the office. Now I was thinking of Kafka, remembering *The Trial*, which I watched earlier that year in the National Theatre. It was around that time that I began throwing the term “Kafkaesque” into conversations and was pleased by the intellectual air it bestowed upon me.

Finally, I said, “No.”

This would be my last investigation, but I didn’t know that. They would never tell me I was off the hook, but after the polygraph, the phone calls stopped. I stepped outside the station to a city renewed by the first rain, smelling as fresh as clothes off the laundry lines. I ran into Good Cop in the parking lot—he must have been there to get my test results. It was the first time I’d

seen him outside the investigation room. He smiled at me. We chatted. I blushed. Still, I didn't see it as a good sign. I didn't feel relieved.

Instead, I gave up trying to pretend that I gave a shit. If this was happening, if I were a suspect in a gun theft and accused of treason, I figured I could get away with pretty much anything. I concentrated on being rude, talking back and lying. I was often late and always grumpy. My boss finally decided he had suffered through enough of my bitter coffee and bad attitude and threw me out of the unit. When I said goodbye to the aging officer I fancied, he shook his head at me with disappointment. I had grown apathetic to these kinds of reactions from people foolish enough to have faith in me. I was relocated to another unit in the same base where the office was duller, the men older. Within a month, I managed to get myself thrown out of that unit as well.

I had now paved my way to the base's recycling bin, a transit unit consisting of misfits and rejects, troubled and authority-challenged soldiers. Soldiers who ended up there had a reputation of being *slow*, and therefore were assigned to do the dirtiest and most basic of jobs, mostly cleaning and standing at the base's gates.

My new job required no training and no skills. A seven-year-old could have done it just as well, or in my case, maybe better. I stood by the gate and followed an armed gate-guard's hand signals. When a car approached, the guard would authorize it and wave at me to open the gate by pressing a button. Once the car passed, it was up to me to push another button to shut the gate. Long hours of standing in the heat made me daydream of travelling to tropical islands with names that rolled in my mouth like candy. Mozambique, Martinique, Mauritius. I dreamt of making love to exotic men who fed me pineapple and coconut on sandy beaches.

On my first two weeks on the job, I damaged two cars. The first one was a little Fiat. I was operating the kind of gate that dropped like a drawbridge onto the ground for the car to drive over. Once the Fiat had passed, I pressed a button to lift the gate back up. Except the Fiat was still passing. I heard the metallic clatter of the gate lifting and a loud thump as it met with the bottom of the car. The little car bounced like a baby with the hiccups and the angry driver's head bumped against the ceiling of his car. I stifled an inappropriate giggle as I pressed the button that relieved him of the amusement park ride.

A week later, I was standing at another gate, which closed like elevator doors. Distracted by an imaginary world filled with romance and sweets, I shut it while the brand-new Volvo, belonging to a high-ranking officer, was still passing. The heavy metal doors closed on it three times, denting the car's back doors repeatedly. I heard somebody calling my name like in a dream and slowly turned to see my finger on the wrong button.

It became clear that I wasn't good at pressing buttons. *They*—the faceless voices on the phone, the scribbled signatures on official documents—recommended that I be transferred to another unit, where I wouldn't have access to button-operated machinery. But before they had a chance to so do, I managed to get myself into more trouble. That day, the meanest officer on the base, whose bad temper and ruthless punishments were the stuff of legends, came by the gate for a routine check. Soldiers avoided eye contact when he walked by, urgently tidying up their appearance in an attempt to look inconspicuous. Something about my attitude ticked him off. He wasn't impressed by my casual salute and my sloppy uniform. When he yelled at me, his face was so close to mine that I could smell digested falafel on his breath. Other soldiers gathered at a safe distance to watch the show.

The blood rushed into my brain as fast as a burning fuse, torching away all rational thought. My face grew hot and tingly and soon my entire body was covered in sweat, every muscle clenched. Then I lost it. “Do not talk to me that way!” I yelled. My voice sounded foreign, as if it belonged to someone else. “It’s not about soldiers or officers. It’s about *people*. Maybe you should take a human relations course that will teach you how to treat people!”

For a moment nobody spoke. I heard an impatient car horn, the clamour of a gate opening. I could hear my own shallow breathing. I looked around and saw a wall of dropped jaws and stunned faces. Then the officer exploded. His face turned a range of red and purple like an old bruise. I took a small step back even before he screamed, “Out of my face! Go to the Major’s office! Move it! *NOW!*”

Waiting at the office of the female Major I’d visited many times over the past year, my trembles began to subside, my heartbeat slowed, and my body resumed a normal temperature. I hesitantly approached the secretary who was browsing through a fashion magazine with a bored expression.

“What do you think is going to happen to me?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” she said without looking at me. “They’ll probably just demote you. They won’t put you in jail.”

“Demote me? I press buttons at the gate.”

“Oh.” She raised her gaze to examine me in the light of this new information. “Then I really don’t know.”

They didn’t put me in jail, but I was now on probation. I’d been grounded, fined, given warnings and put to work before. But this was the first time I’d been put on probation. I almost felt proud. I almost wanted to go to jail.

Once again, I was transferred. This time I had outdone myself. I'd managed to get myself thrown out of a unit they threw people into. I was in limbo, floating between temporary units, tossed around like an unwanted gift. In the meantime, the army decided to conduct a full security check on me. My friends called, saying they were summoned to do an interview about me. I was strangely flattered.

My best friend, who over the past two years had become an officer, looking quite sharp with her ranks and an M16 casually slung over her shoulder, was losing her patience. "Why can't you just make the best of it, like the rest of us?" she asked. In the interview, she told the intelligence officer, "Her biggest problem is that she *will* drive you crazy. I don't see that being a major security threat."

One Friday afternoon my mother sat next to me at the kitchen table. Chicken stew steamed on the stove and the sun painted the cabinets gold. I was reading the weekend papers and didn't look up when she asked, "Why are you doing this to yourself? Why must you fight so hard?"

I blurted without thinking, "Because I'm smarter than them."

She sighed tiredly. "But they are the ones calling the shots. You can't fight a whole army."

Near the end of my service, I was assigned to a new unit, working under an officer who was willing to take a chance on me and whom I didn't hate so much. I made a friend in the new unit, Elsin, a crazy punk rock kid from South Tel Aviv who hated the army as much as I did. Going to work was not so dreadful when she was around. Sometimes we actually enjoyed ourselves. One

day we invented a game called 'put things back in their place.' It involved stretching the phone receiver's cord to the other side of the room and throwing it back, trying to place it back in its cradle. Another day we locked the office while our boss was away, forwarded calls to the neighbouring office and went to the beach. That was a good day.

We had a cold parting, the army and I, a limp handshake with no eye contact. I didn't have a goodbye party as many soldiers did. There was no cake made, no cards exchanged and no tears shed. I packed my things in a rush and left, worried that if I stayed another minute I would somehow find a way to mess everything up again and end up in jail. The army let out a sigh of relief as I walked out and waved cheerfully at the new girl that pressed buttons at the gate.