

# 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.

# 5

A FEW MONTHS passed in the desert.

Avi and his comrades camped in a cluster of pup tents several miles from the base. By this time they had been assigned roles and gear, and Avi had a black tube attached to the bottom of his rifle that fired fist-sized grenades in shiny yellows and greens. The rifle was too long for his body, and he resented its weight. Their faces were sunburned, the skin of their knuckles cracked and chafed, their knees gashed by the vicious little stones that cover the training grounds in that part of the Negev. Their fatigues showed black smears of gun grease and white circles left behind by dried sweat. A minute's walk away from camp took them to the toilet paper scraps and sun-dried shit of their improvised latrine.

They were now accustomed to suffering. When soldiers are glimpsed in the real world outside the army they tend to be looking their best, which can be misleading, because out of sight in their own world their existence is miserable. You are always looking for a way to keep warm, for something to eat, or a place to lie down. You are grimy, and depleted, and your life is not your own, and you are pushed at times to levels of despondence and desperation that

are quite extreme. You find yourself in the company of your friends not marching proudly or even sprinting bravely, as you might have thought, but rather, in Wilfred Owen's words, "bent double, like old beggars under sacks." To be an infantryman is to experience a kind of poverty. This is one of the things that make it worthwhile, but only in retrospect.

The specialized companies of the Fighting Pioneer Youth attract an unusual crowd, one more intellectual than the average infantry draft, but this was an unusual platoon even by those standards. Take Matan, one of Avi's new friends: Matan had found little to stimulate his mind on his kibbutz and claimed not to have read a book of his own volition since *Where Is Pluto?*, a picture book about a dog who goes for a walk and falls into a pond. But now he discovered that among his comrades were people who thought and read and were still doing so, somehow, under the oppressive conditions of basic training. When his tent mate, Amos, brought a book of philosophical meditations called *In the Footsteps of Thoughts* he and Matan actually read it and then talked about it for weeks, lying sore on the ground after days of exertion, breathing the smell of their own unwashed bodies, of earth, and of dusty canvas. It was an assertion of the freedom of their minds. Matan thought at first that they would be mocked. But though the others sometimes yelled at them to shut up and go to sleep, no one laughed. Today Matan is a physicist. Amos is a psychiatrist and lives in Paris.

Avi made a point of saying exactly what he thought, and a few of the soldiers suffered from the acidity of his commentary, typically delivered without regard for the feelings of others. One of them, Ilya, remembers that Avi made it clear from the beginning that he

considered Ilya to be dim-witted, revising his opinion only when he learned that Ilya had read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Avi was never considered a leader in the platoon. But his presence was very much felt, and not always welcome, certainly not at first. Photographs of this time show Avi with the expression of a kid emerging into a world he was not sure he would like, or would like him.

Basic training is like marriage: inside its unforgiving intimacy you can't hide who you are for long. Soon Avi softened. It turned out that he always had books in his knapsack, and when he saw he wasn't alone he began passing them around.

One picture of Avi as a child shows him asleep on his bed surrounded by books and newspapers, and another, taken a few years later, shows him sitting on one side of a room reading at his own birthday party. In high school the librarian, making her rounds at the end of the day, used to find him sitting on a footstool by one of the windows, immobilized by a volume plucked from the shelf: *Brideshead Revisited*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, Nevil Shute's *Pied Piper*. He grew up rooted in the small country where he was born, to lullabies like the famous one Emmanuel the Russian wrote in the 1920s:

Here you will sprout, here you will grow  
 In the land of Israel  
 To happiness, to labor  
 Like your father, you will be a worker.  
 Then you will sow in tears  
 And reap with joy  
 But now listen to *Ima*  
 Please sleep

By high school, as his reading list shows, he was looking for glimpses of other places. When the army called him, his favorite literary guide to the world was Romain Gary, immigrant outsider turned hero of the Free French Air Force; France's consul-general to Hollywood; husband of the actress Jean Seberg and lover of countless others, beginning, if his own account is to be believed, with the maid at age thirteen; Mallorca hedonist; two-time winner of the Prix Goncourt (a feat not technically possible and never repeated), each time under a different name, neither of them his own; child of the same inflamed European Jewish world that yielded Isaac Bashevis Singer, Vasily Grossman, Leonard Cohen, Avi's grandparents, and the state of Israel itself.

Avi conducted a survey. Who had read Gary's masterpiece *The Kites*, an account of a love affair in Normandy under Nazi rule between the daughter of a Polish count and the peasant nephew of an eccentric kite maker? No one? Avi circulated his paperback copy, which was shoved into webbing pouches and nestled in packs among filthy socks. It is possible to imagine that Gary, the shape-shifter of Vilna and Nice, was thus present among them somehow, that in one of their two-man pup tents there was an invisible third occupant with a Gauloise and an empathetic smile.