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Matches

Alan Kaufman

This was in the Gaza Strip: a long, secret, protracted agony of daily attack and counterattack that turned our days and nights into a flare-lit shadow dance with skulls, on head-nodding patrols in areas where even the wild pariah dogs shunned to go.

We were a reserve unit of combat-trained Israeli armoured infantry but minus our big, boxy personnel carriers—long ago we left them buried to their hatches in scorpion-infested sand somewhere out in the camouflaging desert—and sent here to quell "unrest," some general's euphemism for armed Palestinian revolt.

In exchange for our TOW shoulder-held tank blasters and other sorts of dangerous toys that we took pride in handling well, we were issued rubber bullets, body armor, riot helmets, shatterproof shields, and nasty-looking crowd control batons, but the men never used that junk except for the bulletproof ceramic vests. They left the rest rattling in heaps in the corners of our fast-moving steel-plated patrol trucks, or Noon Noons, as they were called.

Because some of us yet thought of ourselves as soldiers. And some of us still thought that we just couldn't be down here forever, though by now the service had dragged on over years.

But again and again they sent us down to Gaza, and the more we operated down here, the more we hated the work, but also the better at it we got until counterinsurgency became our pet calling. It was an ugly little pet indeed, and we had to walk it every day and keep it fed on blood and tears.

We learned as we went, methods strictly unconventional, no big hardware set piece battles but dry, dirty games of small arms and concealable explosives, informers and smugglers, and suspects hauled in for attitude adjustment by the Sheen Bet Security Services. Some of us couldn't even remember how to load or shoot a TOW anymore, let alone recite the code for purity of arms, but we could blow a terrorist safe house sky high in nothing flat and unearth an arms factory where you thought you saw only a dress shop.

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Tonight some sort of wide-scale action was in motion throughout the Khan Yunis sector. Other patrols had gone out in a big hurry, but since no one had summoned us—which as far as we were concerned was just fine—Brandt, Avi, and I had just stayed in the garrison club room, with its scarred Ping-Pong table with the shredded net and a battered TV set with reception so bad that the picture looked like transmissions from Mars.

This TV, by the way, had a wire clothing hanger antenna, and part of the ritual of watching it involved jumping up from your seat to fiddle with it in a futile quest for the exact invisible spot for good reception. There was a way, though, to get it good enough that you could watch the Jordanian broadcast of the American sitcom Three's Company, with its girls in tiny shorts and the emasculated male roommate bumbling around issuing bland punch lines.

It was the closest thing to sex we had, and we sat around staring at it numbly, our unshaven cheeks sagging in insomniacal frowns.

Brandt nodded at the blond TV star with the ponytail. "How sweet is that ass?"

Avi shrugged. "She looks like Goldie Hawn. Falk, here, he likes that—right, Falk? Falk eats that bony Goldie Hawn tail."

"Like lobster." I grinned.

"Lobster's not kosher," Avi said gravely.

"Bullshit," snapped Brandt. "Blondes are kosher. Besides, I eat lobster. With plenty of butter. Huh, Nathan? You like that butter sauce?"

I nodded happily. "You know it. I like it blond and buttery."

"Falk," said Avi. "What kind of Jewish name is that?" to which I replied, "It's New York City Yiddish for 'Go Falk Yourself,'"and we all burst out laughing.

We teamed well together, we three—liked each other a lot, got along. Which meant your back got watched when you went out there knocking on Arafat's door. It gave you something close to peace of mind.

Brandt, our handsome squad leader, was only a reservist corporal but was treated like an officer by the staff because looks-wise he was movie-star caliber; he worked as a ground maintenance supervisor for El Al airlines and so not only had unlimited access to a constantly replenishing supply of Israel's most beautiful stewardesses to fuck, but flew anywhere in the world he liked, cost-free.

And as if to etch our envy with hydrochloric acid on Sinai stone, God had also arranged that Brandt should happen to be a professional soccer referee as well, who was quite often seen on national broadcast, officiating in major league play. And while the rest of us in civilian life scrambled for bleacher seats to the playoff

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games, the lucky SOB saw any match he liked; just turned up at any stadium and walked right in.

Even Brandt's divorce was enviable. Not to go on too much about him, but this Brandt, you see, his ex-wife was a former Miss Israel, a ten named Mariana, the daughter of multimillionaire plastics manufacturers, the famed Borzoys of Haifa. She was Brandt's best friend and close confidante and had not only waived child support but even given Brandt full access to his kids, who could stay with him whenever he liked. She actually even entertained, I was told, some of the girlfriends he brought home.

He had a certain cynical charm, our corporal, a wry confidence that women found absolutely devastating. They fell for him like axed trees.

Some who had gone with him into Tel Aviv on twenty-four hour leaves could attest to how he entered a club and ten minutes later left in the escort of not one but two bombshells. His secret? He regarded all things with a sneering curl of his upper lip, a disdainful gleam in his eye. He beheld alike, with equal contempt, generals, beauty queens, soccer stars, politicians, policemen, tax collectors, and terrorists. He had, as I said, this little smirk. Only a corporal, yet he wielded a captain's influence. When high ranking officers glanced his way for approval, he smirked and it leveled their self-esteem.

Our unit commander was Lieutenant Yitzak, who strolled around in the freezing cold garrison in a wife-beater T-shirt and bling-bling gold chains, his spoiled, rich-boy voice whining in our ears. Here was an officer who stepped from his barrack each dawn with his hand thrust down the crotch of his bleached white BVDs, lovingly scratching his balls and yawning like a pimp on holiday in Cancún. So it was not exactly Yitzak we obeyed, but rather the hulking, begrizzled Sergeant Dedi, who implemented Yitzak's "orders," though only in his own way.

In action, this Sergeant Dedi, who was built like a wrestler, had the dark staring focus of a Ninja tenth-degree black belt. He called clear shots when things got tough and he got you through in one piece. When Dedi spoke in his low, measured way, everybody listened up. We were all agreed, even Yitzak, on one thing: this Dedi was a good boy. Had a bright head too. In civilian life he was finishing up a graduate art history degree. Van Gogh's no help in a fight, but when the rocks and bullets flew, Dedi's the one you wanted in there, dropped to one knee with weapon cradled in his arm, his calm hand signals directing you to cover.

But also, as I had learned on one of my first times out with this unit, in a really tight spot often you needed a fast way out, and for that there was Avi, working the gas and the brake pedals of the steel-plated Noon Noons.

Avi had the deadpan reflexes of a mobbed-up getaway man; could spin-turn in a kasbah alley, under fire, a two-ton armoured car.

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Bullets didn't even make him flinch. He drove with a kind of dour defiance. Avi even sort of looked gangland, with his swarthy, hard-boned face, lanky build, kinked nap, and laconic air.

A Fez-born Moroccan, he had smuggled himself to Israel as a teen and now owned and operated in civilian life a paid-up Mercedes Benz limo taxi that made shuttle runs beween Tel Aviv and the Holy City of Jerusalem.

I was the anomalous American, to most Israelis something strange: a New York Jew who had actually acquired Israeli citizenship in return for the dubious privilege of getting called up to serve in the most dangerous army on earth, the Israel Defence Forces.

For in so doing I had bucked what had become, after years of ceaseless warfare and endless terrorism, the primo fantasy of so many sabras born behind the Green Line, Israel's traditional borderline: complete your army service, and then jet straight out for the fleshpots of Berlin, Amsterdam, New York, or L.A., there to live by your greencarded wits, make a killing in bucks, not blood, and, more so, to thrive immersed in Coppertone and Disney World, SUVs, Costco, and Cost Plus, neck-deep in fluffy towels, CDs, skateboards, laptops, wide-screen TVs, and Betty Crocker cake mix.

Most Israelis who fled the Jewish State wanted never ever to have to don a uniform again, or fire a .05 machine gun, or numbly roll through an Arab refugee camp exposed to hidden blackmasked jihadists with shoulder-held RPG waiting to turn your jeep into a Jerry Bruckheimer fireball.

So all through my two years of regular army service and now as a reservist I was asked, again and again, by grinning, incredulous troops: "What brought you to this insane mess? Why join the army if you don't have to?"

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