

Oren Shafir: Dead Man's Boots

Jinji wore Avi's boots after Avi died. It doesn't matter how he died. Maybe he got caught by a friendly bullet. Maybe he caught shrapnel in the head. Maybe he got ambushed by the enemy dressed as civilians. Anyway you look at it, he was too young and too energetic to die. His mother wailed at the funeral the way only the Sephardics can. She beat the earth and challenged the holy Jewish God and the holy man's army the way only a mother can. And she did not appreciate the bang bang military funeral. No one did. It was an intrusion, which seemed totally incongruous with the mother scream-moaning her son's name over and over, "Ah vee, Ah vee" in such a way that it seemed we all were intruding. It seemed her son was dying right then and there before her eyes. Although, to her he was lost the day he decided to go in a combat unit. She wanted him to be a jobnik: to get an easy job in a base somewhere near home where he would be safe and visit her every day. It was a waste. But let me make something clear. This is not an anti-military or anti-war story. It's just a tale that I have to tell because I'm a storyteller, and I was there. There's no such thing as anti-war stories: they don't work. What they're really all about is growing up. In fiction, war is just the crisis in a boy's life – the great ritual test he must overcome to be a man. And after all, what boy doesn't want to become a man? Besides, let's be honest, machine guns, grenades and missile launchers give one a sense of power. They are exciting and fun, especially to boys. Now, if you're asking me personally, I think armies suck. There's nothing fun about sleeping four hours a night or climbing mountains in the middle of the night. But the worst part is the loss of control over your own life. You never know where you're going

to get sent or what you're going to have to do, or for how long. You will in fact lose your innocence and end up looking at the world cynically. But it won't happen by reading a war story or watching the movie Platoon. Every boy must learn the hard way.

First, you find that you can lie straight faced to get out of some forced march or run or something. Then, you find out that you can steal, as long as it's not from your own platoon. Finally, you wind up like Jinji, wearing dead man's boots and not thinking too much about it. Okay, to be honest, Jinji did tell me once that Avi had kind of narrow feet, and when the boots pressed in, he got a flash picture in his head of the way Avi walked – one of Avi's legs was a bit shorter than the other – and he said that he could sort of feel Avi's smile bouncing around inside him making him happy and sad at the same time. But basically he wore them cause he needed boots. None of us thought about it much.

Jinji was a terrific loser. He lost his ear plugs at the shooting range, and his mess tin at the canteen. He lost all his long underwear, a magazine clip, a beret and three different wrist-watches. And his boots? Well, you won't believe me, but one got stolen by a coyote at night when were training in the Negev desert. He thought it was a dog until later when he remembered the way it bolted up into the rocks. One boot isn't much good, and I guess he just lost his extra pair. They disappeared – stolen probably. And then of course, he lost his best friend whose boots he was wearing. Not easy to get hold of boots in Lebanon. You can't just sneak into the next tent at night and steal somebody's. They might wake up screaming and shooting. The Italian used to wake up screaming every night for no reason at all (which wasn't such a good thing).

But anyway, you see, Avi was the one who used to help Jinji replace all his missing things in the first place. So, it was kind of fitting that Jinji took Avi's boots. Avi was always helping

Jinji. Jinji could never dismantle the big weapons without some help. Avi helped him do the camouflage properly on his helmet. It was Jinji's job to carry the 20-liter water container on his back. He could carry it alright. But Avi used to help him tie it to the carrying rack, so it wouldn't fall off in the middle of a training exercise or a war or something. Hell, Jinji's shirt was buttoned up wrong half the time. When Avi died, we thought Jinji was going to crack. But then he got a girlfriend in Tel-Aviv, and that kept him going. Beirut to Tel-Aviv is a long way to hitchhike on 48-hours leave. But it's worth it. After a while, Jinji learned how to take care of himself a little better. He stopped losing so many things. Sure he was a bit nuts. He got into all kinds of mysticism, read a lot of books about life after death, read the Book of Zohar over and over. He was into numerology. He even started talking about changing his name for some reason I never quite understood, as if it would have made a difference – no one called him by his real name anyway. But hey, who wasn't nuts out there?

The guys in unit C had a rule, or a law as they called it, that if somebody didn't get laid for a year, he automatically became a virgin again. Yosi Gur took this seriously and his year was just about up. His friend Moosh convinced him that if he plucked his eyebrows, he'd get laid on his next leave, which was coming up. (I can't remember if it worked.) Yeah, these guys were strange. Arik truly believed he could control the weather and others believed he could too. His claim to fame was supposedly getting us out of a big field exercise by bringing on a storm with a rain dance. He had really danced hard. You could see the concentration in his eyes. And he chanted. No one was laughing. Until it rained, and then it had been one big party.

Arik tried again the day we were supposed to take an enemy street in Beirut. But, it doesn't

rain in Beirut in the middle of July. And anyway, this time he was just trying to lighten the mood. We were still soldiers, and we knew this time it was no exercise.

We were under this highway bridge when it happened. I don't like to think about that bridge. Let's just say, it was an enclosed circular cement part of the city where we must have looked like ducks in a shooting gallery to somebody. Although they weren't shooting bullets, and they probably weren't all that close. RPG missiles started coming at us. We could hear them whistling by. We heard the first one hit a wall. Then we saw Benny bleeding from his arm, even though he wasn't even in the line of fire. Shrapnel. And they kept whistling. Goddamn if I didn't find myself behind and half underneath a car hugging the gasoline-stinking asphalt like a lost friend.

Jinji was next to me. We noticed each other, and got on our hands and knees. Our eyes met.

"Some shit, huh?" I said.

He managed half a smile. The missiles kept whistling and crashing. Then his smile disappeared as his hands groped for something around his chest.

"Oh no."

"What is it?"

"My dog tags," he said. "I must have forgot them in Tel-Aviv."

"Fuck that. Never mind that," I said. "You're not going to die. Nobody's going to die.

Besides," I added, "you have the extra tags in your boots."

Now God help me, all the blood in his face disappeared. His face went from hot-red to chalk-white before my eyes, and his ridiculous bright-red hair made it all the more shocking.

"Avi's mother will be informed of his death all over again," is what I think he said. It came out too quietly for me to be sure. The missiles kept whistling and exploding. Then he screamed, "I have to take them off."

"Take what off?" I screamed back.

"The boots. Avi's boots."

Sometimes I think he thought he had to get them off or he would die – like when if you forget your umbrella, it's sure to rain. But mostly I'm filled with awe that he could feel such empathy for Avi's mother at such a time. The missiles kept whistling.

I pushed him down as he tried to rise.

"You can't take off your boots, you idiot. Just take the tags out for gods sake."

"Yes, yes," he agreed, and he sat on his butt and started to fiddle with the piece of plastic, which held the tags in place in a kind of slot on the side of the boot. A missile flew by blasting a wall a few meters behind us. I got up on one knee and was going to help him take the tags out – I think I was about to help him when I felt something trickle on my arm. I looked up and saw a hole in the water container on Jinji's back. Then, he made a noise. A gurgling noise. He was holding his throat. His hands were bloody. His eyes were scared. I could not move. For a long second – or maybe it was half a minute or a few minutes – I could not move or react. The missiles kept whistling.

Finally I yelled, "He's injured. Help him."

Then I was running and helping carry the stretcher. "Give him some morphine," I kept shouting. "Give him morphine." He looked horrified. Now, I could see the hole in his throat. I didn't want him to suffer.

What an asshole I was running alongside the stretcher yelling, "give him morphine." And

yelling it again as they loaded him on the helicopter. But you can't make time go the other way. You can't take back even one of the infinite actions that make things happen to others. And to yourself. If you could, Jinji never would have put those boots on. And I would not have let him float away into the sky. Desperately and futilely trying to get someone's attention. To get someone to please, please help him. To take his boots off.

