

In these shoes?

Rachel Holmes

There are very few problems in life that cannot be solved by shoes.

I'm at Ben Gurion airport eyeing up an IDF soldier who is riffling through my underwear with an explosives trace-detection device. He's armed with a new standard issue MTAR-21, a devastatingly buff body in impeccable uniform, and a disarming smile. My defences are the comparably slight artillery of a mild hangover from my Ramallah leaving party last night and the replay in my head of my favourite song I was listening to on my MC-699 iPod before airport security made me take it off and hand it over for inspection. It's a (Product) Red first edition iPod lovingly customised by my boyfriend for Valentine's Day, and I want it back.

My wheely suitcase is also rose socialist red. Safiya calls it The Incredible Mary Poppins: on account of the fact that it's diminutive and neat and yet so well engineered as to be deceptively capacious. It can take me away for a weekend, or a year.

Yesterday, I sat on my bed and presented this carefully packed case to Safiya and the puppies for a dry-run preview inspection. 'Are you crazy? You can't take *any* of *these*.' She impatiently lobbed out books, papers, notebooks, magazines, programmes, receipts, business cards, cosmetics, spices, ceramics, CDs, DVDs, and various gifts. We put them in a cardboard box to be sent back to me another way; but I was

resentful. It's inconvenient to have to wait for my notebooks, papers, books and recordings. Once again, the occupation is going to hold up an important piece of work for many more months. Transporting any of this electronically is out of the question.

Checking once again that I'd deleted all my mobile contacts and erased the hard drive on my laptop, Sufiya cuffed my shoulder, 'C'mon girlfriend, get over it. Everyone's coming to the café to say goodbye. Stop sulking and smile. Party time.'

Mid-evening, Abu Ameen turned up. He was flushed, harassed, and waving triumphantly a big red plastic bag bearing the brand legend of his workshops and shoe boutique in both Arabic and English:

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I had nagged him relentlessly to finish making my shoes before I left. I pushed a generous shot of Arak Sabat Extra into his hand and he gave me the bag and winked. 'Try them on habibti. See if they fit.' As I slipped my feet into my virgin pair of glorious Abu Ameen-tooled classic court shoes, Safiya quietly picked up the bright red branded bag and the labelled box and took them away.

These shoes are in the softest white leather. The balance was perfect. It felt like I was walking on clouds.

I like shoes to have some wit, a knowing reference and not to take themselves too seriously. The court is a great universal in the canon of shoe classics. Elegant, elongating the leg, internationally recognised. The stylish, understated, diplomatic ambassador of footwear, veiling *realpolitik* beneath a low-key, harmonious exterior. The choice of white

leather is a little joke for myself; ironic homage to Princess Diana and my teenage aesthetic awakening – if you can call it that – in the 1980s.

Mo span one of my favourite songs and with all the maturity of a six year old wearing her first party shoes, I danced around the café showing off my Princesses Diana's. Amed sipped his Arak, tapped his foot approvingly and smiled at his master craftwork. The track was *In These Shoes?* by the late, great, lamented Kirsty MacColl. I carry it with me everywhere.

'Go on. Act your ass off. An Oscar award winning performance, please. No midnight emergency phone calls, we're all too tired. Get through. Stick to the script we rehearsed. To the letter. Just remember, whatever they do, whatever they say, don't argue, and Do.Not.Lose.Your.Temper.' Safiya banged the top of the taxi and I was off on my way to fairyland. Glum. Shunting through the checkpoints. I berated myself for not taking the extra time and spending the extra money for a potentially easier passage back through Jordan. Blew cash on shoes instead. Bloody idiot. Bloody stupid occupation. Ben Bloody Gurion airport.

The Princess Diana's were pushed into the top of my hand luggage. I thought about Safiya's reminder to give a faultless, word perfect performance, about my natural argumentativeness, and absent-mindedly pulled out the shoes and put them on.

So here we are. Incredible Mary Poppins is spread-eagled across the security counter, her contents unrolled, probed, scattered, thrown, in a three metre trail over the full length of the counter. Incredible Mary Poppins is being dismembered – I think – as I resolve myself to inner calm, hit replay in my head and continue *In these shoes?* – the track I was listening to on my iPod before Soldier Sex-on-Legs made me

hand it over and started handling my smalls. Good thing I always wear first-class underwear: pity it's not all clean.

The security stripdown moves in provocatively slow, deliberated motion. This is going to take *h-o-u-r-s*. Three of them working on my case. Two of them in my hand luggage. One in my laptop.

Time, then, for me to mentally produce a full tribute concert of *In These Shoes?* for my inner ear of all the versions I can think of. Staring fixedly at my IDF cutie -- and thinking he would never be able to take me home to mother -- the houselights go down and in my inner eye, the show begins.

The opening star turn is, of course, Kirsty on Tropical Rainstorm, original cut. Next, Bette Midler gives it up with the Peace Corps and cowboy boots variation, followed by Claudia Acuna. Each diva tweaks the tempo and lyrics to fit her size and style. My glittering gig progresses with a medley of film and TV soundtrack versions; Sex and the City (Carrie Manolos) and Kinky Boots. Now for the comic relief: Catherine Tate's gutsy, tent-filling and entirely off-key tribute to Kirsty. For the finale, and without a doubt the best version ever yet, Camille O'Sullivan, in sparkling red fuck-me Dorothy heels, fishnet legs and a heavenly voice from here to eternity.

The show's over. Kirsty's been brought back from the dead, twice. I've made Camille do three encores. But security are still working their way through my possessions. I need a new adaptation.

I refocus on the outer world and Soldier-Sex-on-Legs. He really is ludicrously handsome. Shame about the job. Bound uncomfortably in transient intimacy by ideological lunacy as we are, I decide we deserve our own cover version. It comes easily:

*I once met a man with a sense of adventure
He was dressed to kill wherever he went
He said, 'Let's make love on a mountain top
Under the stars on the Dome of the Rock.'
I said, 'In these shoes?
I don't think so.'
I said, 'Honey, let's do it here.'*

Still staring at him, now speculatively, I imagine our new version played at full volume throughout the airport PA system, broadcast in harmony by a choral ensemble of all the sexy divas who have made it their own. No, he definitely couldn't take me home to mother.

After that, it gets nasty. Four hours of perfectly concentric argument. Do you speak Hebrew? Are you Jewish? Do you have family here? Why have you been here during Pesach? Why have you been in Israel? What have you been doing? Where have you been? Have you been in the West Bank? Do you know any Arabs? What are the names of your friends? What are their addresses? Why have you got so many Jordanian stamps in your passport? Time to pull out the Oscar-award winning performance. Again. And then again. Rewind, repeat.

I'm word perfect, and they find nothing in my luggage. Safiyah has saved me. Finally, I'm allowed through.

Soldier-Sex-on-Legs escorts me to the prized finishing line of my passport clearance with decorous gentility and the briefest, lightest pressure of a hand in the small of my back, as if guiding me to the dance floor.

I settle gratefully into my seat and just as we are airborne, take off my shoes. It's at this moment that I see for the first time the upturned soles of Abu Ameer's handiwork, branded in glistening gilt:

Rahalah.

Made in Palestine

[Reprise: crescendo]

Oh Honey, let's do it here.

In these shoes?

I don't think so.