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### **The Gunslinger of Chelem By Lavie Tidhar**

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Lavie's story "Letters From Weirside" appeared in the Apex Publications' Stoker Award nominated anthology *Aegri Somnia* in 2006.

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The dream called him to it, sucked him into a maelstrom of swirling colours, hand-drawn clouds, feet stamping, hands clapping, the sound of a siren, the smell of hot mustard, egg yolks, dust devils, the hint of a kiss, a high, yellow sun, sands spreading in the distance, houses made of wood.

High noon. The sun erased all shadows. He stood in the heart of a town, of the kind that appeared in old Westerns. A clock-tower, the hands standing at a minute to twelve. One-storey houses. One long main street: a bank, a bar, a church, a horse trader, a gun shop. In the corner, the prosperous front of the coffin-builder.

Quiet. The town was deserted, a ghost town. Or maybe, he thought, maybe they're all hiding.

He discovered a pair of guns on his hips. He tried them, one after the other. They were like additional fingers in his hands. He was *fast*.

Of course.

He remembered now. He practised drawing them and smiled.

He was the best of the best.

And then he saw him.

The gunslinger stood with his back to the clock-tower. A wide-brimmed hat shaded his face. The hands of the clock moved towards the hour, touched it together—

They both drew their guns but there was only one shot.

The dream spat him out, wiped him out, threw him out to a maelstrom of swirling darkness, chalk-marks, clapping hands, a whistle, the taste of blood; at last, the taste of nothing.

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Chelem.”

“Yes.”

“Where is it?”

“Near Yokne’am.”

“Was.”

“What?”

“Was. Where Yokne’am was.”

“For your information, the Society for Bringing Back Yokne’am employs several people with the capacity for Deep Dre—”

“Who?”

“Aharoni.”

“Aharoni? The city won’t last five minutes and it would be populated by snails. Or bats.”

“Shimshon.”

“Not capable of dreaming even *one* whole street.”

“Anyway.”

“Yes.”

“We want you to go there.”

“To Yokne’am?”

“To Chelem.”

“Where is it?”

“Near Yokne’am—”

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Raphael woke up. The alarming clock swore at him in Russian.

Alarm, he thought. *Alarm* clock.

The crock began to make the sound of ten newborn babies being eaten simultaneously.

*Clock*, damn it, he thought, and finally heard the normal ring.

Yokne’am, he thought. And then—Chelem.

Where is it?

Coffee. He pulled himself towards the kitchen.

Over the course of the night, the espresso machine had turned into a chicken and had just laid a brown egg.

He took the egg. It had no shell. He tasted it carefully, shrugged and ate it whole.

The cigarette pack, he thought. On the table.

When he approached the pack turned into a lizard and moved away with a cough.

“I was going to quit anyhow,” he said to the air. The air ignored him.

A pat on the chicken’s back produced another egg, and he took it with him on his way out.

Sum it up for me,” Raphael said. He didn’t feel so well. The singing birds had almost disappeared to the corners of his eyes and their song—an *a capella* rendition of “The Sea of Wheat”—had faded to a whisper.

“His name’s Stephen Cohen,” Michal said. Michal drove. Raphael sat in the passenger seat, equipped with dark shades and a headache.

“American?”

“The parents made *Aliyah*.”

“Can you turn down the music?” Raphael said.

Michal turned her head to him, began to smile, changed her mind and returned her eyes to the road. “The radio isn’t on.”

“Oy.”

“Do you want a pill?”

“What have you got?”

“Something that’d wake you up.”

He dry-swallowed the pill. It had a bitter, not entirely unpleasant taste. The birds disappeared. Silence settled on the world.

Raphael *liked* silence. Raphael liked to sleep, and to dream. Raphael liked his job at the REM, but silence wasn’t usually a fact of life at the unit. Silence was a thing of luxury, reserved for those regular policemen who only ever dealt with routine murders, robbery and theft, blackmail and kidnapping that were the waking world’s natural lot.

He liked his job, but for those days when he had to get out of bed, get dressed, drink coffee, wear dark shades, take those energy pills of Michal’s and go to some damned place in the middle of nowhere. *Before* noon.

“So what did he do?” he said now. “What could be so important that I have to get up for it? My range—”

“Your range isn’t enough,” Michal said. “You need to be physically close.”

“What are you trying to tell me?” Raphael said, and he smiled.

“Don’t start,” Michal said.

They drove in silence.

“So what did he do?” Raphael said.

“Didn’t you see?”

“What?”

“The dream. Before you woke up.”

He tried to remember. Fragments came back to him, became at last a whole memory. The town, the hour, the sun. The gunslinger.

The shot, and then ... nothing.

“He doesn’t just shoot people,” Raphael said.

“No.”

“He’s *good*,” Raphael said. “The town itself wasn’t too detailed, more like a blueprint for a building than a building itself, but the *focus* was extraordinary. Even from a distance, even second-hand, you can feel it. He built that dream carefully, and he has enough power to hold it there. Who are the people he shoots?”

“You won’t believe it,” Michal said.

Outside, the view was green; trees and square, blooming fields. A pterodactyl circled high overhead, became suddenly a yellow plastic duck, and disappeared. Raphael cursed all the people who overslept. Apart from him, of course. For him it was *work*.

“He lives somewhere near where Yokne’am used to be. He called the place Chelem. The town exists even when he’s awake. You could say he is stuck in the dream. And in the dream, he’s the best gunfighter there ever was. Better than Billy the Kid, better than Doc Holliday, better than Jesse James, better than—”

“I get it,” Raphael said. “He’s good. *Nu*?” It occurred to him that Michal was becoming a little too enthusiastic about her subject.

“So people come to *him*. You understand? They come from all over the country. All over the *world*. He’s killed more than thirty people so far—at least those we know of. They come to challenge him. Gunfighters. People egg each other on in the pub—let’s see you take on the gunslinger of Chelem.”

“*The gunslinger of Chelem*?” Raphael said. “Who came up with that name?”

“The papers,” Michal said, “Cohen just doesn’t sound the same.”

“So what do you want me to do, exactly? Fight him? A stand-off at high noon with guns drawn?”

Michal smiled and stopped the car. “I knew you’d understand.” She opened the door and got out of the car. Outside, the green had turned to desert.

“We’re there.”

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Raphael napped. It is a thing different from sleep.

Raphael napped and dreamed of graves. Chelem’s cemetery spread out before him. Chelem’s cemetery was wide. Spacious. It had *personality*.

It had more than thirty graves.

He approached the gravedigger, a short, bald man who lacked distinct facial features. His voice was a kind of faded memory of the way people spoke in the old westerns.

“You work here long?”

“All the time,” the gravedigger said.

“And at night?”

The gravedigger shrugged. “Night?”

The place that is always one minute from high noon...

“Anyone ever leave here and not through the cemetery?”

The gravedigger shook his head. His movements, too, were limited, Raphael saw. Shoulders, head. The hands either digging or resting. “Never.”

“He’s good, then?”

“He’s invincible.”

Raphael woke up. No cemetery. No gravedigger. The desert remained.

How do you beat someone like that? The rules of the dream were the gunslinger’s rules. You couldn’t change the dream and give Raphael, say, a machine gun. Or a cannon. Or a bullet-resistant body. The dream was Stephen Cohen’s dream, the gunslinger of Chelem’s dream.

The rules. There was only one way to fight the gunslinger. At high noon, in the town square, by the clock-tower. Guns drawn.

And then he began to think. There was a way. Maybe. He thought of the old films.

He went and talked to Michal. She was looking into the distance, into the desert, towards the town. She had a dreamy look in her eyes.

“Michal!”

She shook her head, stood up, and opened the camp bed above the sand for him. Raphael sighed. He hated going into the field.

He climbed into bed and curled up in the blanket. “Where’s Teddy?”

“What?” Michal said.

“Teddy,” Raphael said. “Where’s Teddy!”

Michal sighed, said, “Hold on.” Looked in the back seat of the car and brought out a teddy bear with one eye missing.

“There’s Teddy,” Michal said, but Raphael no longer heard, nor did he see her look towards the town, sigh again and begin stepping towards Chelem, leaving light footprints in the sand, two heavy guns around her waist.

Raphael, instead, fell asleep. His sleep was immediate, and deep.

He slept, and in his sleep he dreamed.

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The Man With No Name walked in the desert. He wore a dusty poncho, and a wide-brimmed hat covered his face. He had been in the desert for a long time. He was searching for the gunslinger. He and the gunslinger had met in the past. The gunslinger had killed the Man With No Name’s sweetheart. If he ever had a name it was buried deep in the past. The Man With No Name planned to leave the gunslinger himself buried in the past. He had been searching for him for a long time. And now he had found him.

The town was before him. A wooden sign that creaked in the wind said ‘Chelem’.

He passed through the open gate. Main Street spread out before him. He saw a lone figure, a scared old man who approached him and began to timidly measure him from head to toe.

Measure him for a coffin.

The Man With No Name laughed, and he put a coin into the man’s hand and walked towards the square. The clock at the top of the tower showed a minute to twelve. The sun was high in the sky. There was no shade.

The gunslinger waited for him in the square. The Man With No Name stepped towards him and stopped in the distance.

A firing distance.

“You!” said the gunslinger. “You can’t!”

“By the rules,” Raphael said, and the Man With No Name repeated his words aloud.

“I assume you’re good,” the gunslinger said, and he was talking now directly to Raphael.

“The best,” Raphael said through the man he had dreamed into being.

“Then it would be an honour for me to kill both you *and* him,” the gunslinger said.

The Man With No Name smiled and chewed on an unlit cigar. “You can try,” Raphael said, “but no one beats Eastwood.”

The second hand ticked, ticked, ticked again ... was that sweat on the gunslinger's face?

The hand moved.

Tick.

Tick.

"Wait," the gunslinger said.

The hand had stopped. One second to noon.

The Man With No Name looked at the gunslinger and spat on the ground.

"Interesting," Raphael said, "but the whole nature of your dream is in the passing of these seconds towards the fight. You can't stop the clock forever."

"If you shoot me," the gunslinger said, and now it was *his* turn to smile, "I'll kill *her*."

The whistle of an approaching train sounded in the distance, and rail tracks appeared in the middle of Main Street and passed through the square. On the track, tied to the rails, was Michal.

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"What are you doing here?" Raphael shouted.

"She can't speak," the gunslinger said, "her mouth is gagged." He shrugged. "She tried to challenge me to a fight. They always do. The women especially. I thought that instead of killing her I could use her as insurance. Against you."

"So what happens now?" Raphael said. The Man With No Name moved impatiently. Let me handle this, he seemed to say.

"Now?" the gunslinger said. "The train is on its way here. Can you see it, coming towards us? In a short while—a very short while—it will arrive. I'll be able to control the time element until then. Until a second before it hits your girlfriend. In the last second, the clock will strike twelve, and then ... you can try killing me, or try saving your sweetheart. And if you try to shoot me now, I'll shoot her."

"Colleague," Raphael said.

"What?"

"Colleague, not girlfriend. Or sweetheart."

"Not in this dream," the gunslinger said.

The smoke from the train appeared above the houses. Raphael looked towards the train. The Man With No Name pulled a matchbox out of his poncho and



lit his cigar.

“The choice’s yours,” the gunslinger said.

The Man With No Name smiled, and threw the burning match on the ground.

“I’m going to kill you,” the Man With No Name said. “Then she and I will ride together towards the sunset.”

“You haven’t got a horse,” the gunslinger said.

“There will be a horse waiting for us around the corner. As soon as I’ve killed you.”

“And an orchestra, too, I’m sure.”

“Of course.”

“Don’t try anything stupid,” the gunslinger said. His hand shook. Something burned at the Man With No Name’s back. The match had lit a small line of gunpowder that moved away in the direction he had come from. Heat, growing. The train on its way, so close now, one more moment and it will hit—

The Man With No Name smiled—

A loud explosion sounded as the barrel of gunpowder he had left behind caught fire—

The train rose in the air—

And fell on the coffin maker’s shop—

There was the sound of a shot.

The Man With No Name fell to the ground. His hand examined the round hole in the poncho. A tired, wondering expression appeared on his face, as he lay still on the sand.

In the silence, the only sound was Michal’s cries. “Raphael!” she shouted. “Raphael!”

The time was one minute past twelve.

Something moved.

“Raphael!”

The Man With No Name sat up. He shook his head and opened the poncho. Underneath was a block of metal. He untied it and let it fall to the ground. He looked towards the clock-tower.

The gunslinger was lying on his back below the tower. He didn’t move. When

he approached him, the Man With No Name saw the small, neat hole between the gunslinger's eyes.

The Man With No Name shook his head, turned, and went to Michal. He untied her and helped her stand.

She looked at him admiringly. "I never imagined..." she said. "Not even in my most intimate dreams, that the day will come when you ... when I ... together..."

"Michal," Raphael said, "I, too ... I have, feelings..."

"Raphael," Michal said.

"Yes?"

"I'm grateful and everything, but, do you mind...?"

"What?"

"Leaving us alone?"

"Come with me," the Man With No Name said. He took Michal's hand in his and led her behind the corner. A black horse waited for them there. The Man With No Name helped Michal onto the horse and then climbed on its back himself. Michal hugged his waist and he led the horse, slowly and with confidence, through Main Street, where people had begun to gather, and to look at them, and to whisper, and point, and finally smile.

Michal and the Man With No Name rode into the desert, towards the setting sun.

The orchestra played.

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Raphael woke up and felt as though he had swallowed a frog.

He hated it when that happened to him. He didn't know why he dreamed of frogs. He hated frogs.

He sat up. He was in the car, in the back seat. Michal was driving. She was whistling an old, familiar tune. *The end of the dream*, he thought, and then, *Ennio Morricone*. Pain blossomed in his head.

Then he remembered the rest. The headache grew. "Michal," he croaked, then swallowed the frog and burped. That was better.

"Raphael."

"About what I said ... in the context of the dream ... I just wanted to say, I wasn't serious, you know?"

“What?” Michal said. She had a dreamy look in her eyes. Again. “Fine.”

“Oh,” Raphael said. “Good.”

“Yes,” Michal said. “It was.”

In the end Raphael had to look for the pills on his own.

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