

# The Master

By Lavie Tidhar

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That morning Shaul found it hard to wake up; his mind kept grasping at the remains of a fading dream, so that his waking was unusually prolonged. When he did finally surface it was mid-morning, and the sun was streaming through the open windows, making him blink and put on his glasses. The dream had dissipated: he could only remember a vague sense of unease, unaccompanied by any images.

His routine had been the same ever since Na'ama died. He stood up, visited the small bathroom where he peed, clenching his teeth at the pain that was no longer new, but which he never got used to. Having finished that with some relief, he went into the main room of the apartment, which included a small kitchen area where he put a *finjan* on the gas ring. Though he was no longer allowed coffee he nevertheless let himself have this small luxury, allowed himself this one morning cup, cooked in the old way, as if he were still a young man, camping in the desert beside his jeep, the long-handled *finjan* resting on stones above a low fire. As he waited for the coffee to brew his gaze fell on the single painting on the wall, M. Aryeh's illustration for one of his most successful books, *The Young Riders Against the Egyptian Fiend*. Of all the Young Riders books, this one was for him the most personal, having drawn on his experience in the Sinai with Arik, who people now called by his family name, Sharon, but who always remained Arik for him, even though they had rarely met since that long-ago war. The painting showed the Young Riders with the innocent, beautiful faces of *sabras*, both proud and pure, that M. Aryeh was so good at capturing with only a few strokes: they were caught in sharp relief against a stark desert background, a beating sun illuminating the Israeli tanks on a hill in the distance.

He had a letter from Arik, somewhere in his drawers, praising him for his educational work. He had been so sure of himself then, so filled with the purpose of literature and the righteousness of what he was doing: helping bring up a new generation on sound Zionist principles, while providing the children with excitement and adventure. He never got paid much, or enough: he worked prodigiously in the small Tel Aviv apartment, writing one book after another, using pseudonyms when it was necessary. Na'ama worked in the *Mashbir* department store, selling perfume, paying the bills when his publishers were late with payments, which was often. They had no children of their own.

He took the coffee—it was black and with no sugar—out onto the veranda and stood there for a long moment, watching the city. Something undefined worried at him, like a loose tooth—another, awkward sensation one became familiar with as old age slowly set in—something about his dream remained, some unnamed darkness that threatened to suffocate him. He forced himself to drink from the coffee and tried to enjoy the sun on his face. There was a school nearby and he listened to the children's shouts and laughter for a while, remembering how he used to draw inspiration from them in the past.

Not any more. He was no longer fashionable, and had not, in fact, written or published a book for several years. The children, too, were now almost alien to him: they were a generation he had not anticipated. They spoke a Hebrew filled with American idioms; their games were no longer hide and seek, or tag, or leapfrog, or even skipping rope; they were a generation weaned on television and PlayStations, brought up in shopping-malls; he and the Young Riders had no place in their world.

He had an engagement today, a break from his usual routine. Several months ago he received a letter inquiring, in polite, careful terms, almost as if afraid to offend him, if he could come speak about his work to a convention. It was a new thing: a gathering of young people, children of the Seventies and Eighties, mainly, now grown up, still clinging, he thought with a bitterness that surprised him, to their long-gone

childhoods. He knew he should have been flattered; they were all, the letter said, big fans of his work, had grown up on the Young Riders books, as well as his forays into science fiction adventure with *The Voyages of the Spaceship Kidon* series, which lasted only five books, and all the rest of them too, the *Circus of Mystery* series, the tales of *Menachem Zion, the Jewish Cowboy*. . . . The writer of the letter was surprisingly knowledgeable about his work, even mentioning titles Shaul himself had nearly forgotten. They would be honoured to have him come and talk to them, and sign some books.

He thought about this now, sipping the coffee at longer and longer intervals. He had written back, finally, to say that, yes, he would be delighted to come; but even now he still hadn't made up his mind if he should go. The truth was that he felt uncomfortable with this role they seemed to expect him to play, as ancient writer come back from the dead, like the Arab zombie-woman Fatima in *The Adventure of the Rotting Corpse*. The truth was that he was a relic. The children at the school below would have been unlikely to have ever heard his name. He had argued long with himself before accepting the invitation to this convention—a strange word, an English word by birth and an American one by association—but had finally given in to his innate sense of vanity, which he knew would remain vexed at him had he turned his back on these, his few remaining fans. It was vanity; he knew himself well enough, after all the years, not to deceive himself. They had also offered him money, and though he told himself he didn't need it, his years at the typewriter, getting paid meagrely by the word, working to deadlines, and frequently having to chase up payment from reluctant publishers, had instilled in him a respect for money which remained with him always.

He remembered now, as he stood on the veranda, one of his last meetings with his publisher, Ma'aravi, in the early Eighties. It was, he had come to realise, an important point in his life; not a full stop or an exclamation mark, perhaps, but a dash—suggesting the end of the sentence, his sentence, was fast approaching.

Ma'aravi had earned himself, and then lost, a villa in Herzliya Pituach, the rich men's suburb outside Tel Aviv, and was now back to working in the same basement from which he had started fifty years before. They met in the café at Habima, the old theatre café where they had always met before. Ma'aravi had grown fat with the years, but had lost none of his energy. He smoked Marlboro after Marlboro and talked through the smoke, waving his hands to emphasise his points. "I want you to write a new Young Riders book for me," he said. "There is a growing nostalgia for your work, did you know that? All those young parents now are people who grew up on the adventures of Lotem and his friends." He took a deep, satisfied drag on his cigarette and said, with the same air of absolute confidence Shaul remembered from the old days, "There is a market for it."

Ma'aravi had always believed in him, knowing his books would sell, believing just as he did that they were more than mere adventure stories, that they had a purpose beyond that: they were tales of Jewish bravery against innumerable foes, the story of a small country, small but proud, a small country surrounded by enemies.

Now . . . There was a cold peace with Egypt, and war had shifted, had become not an engagement of armies in open battle but a dirty, secret war, a war of assassination and terrorism, bombs and long-distance missiles. Arik was on the move again, this time in Lebanon, and it was proving highly unpopular back home, or at least in Tel Aviv. "No," Shaul said at last, and watched Ma'aravi's eyes for a sign he understood. "It would be wrong of me to bring them back. This is no longer their war."

"It is always their war," Ma'aravi said, then fell silent. He watched him through the smoke, his eyes alert, waiting for Shaul to ask.

"What do you have in mind?"

Ma'aravi smiled and spread himself more evenly in the chair. "Yasser Arafat," he said. "I was thinking of something along the lines of *The Young Riders Against the Master of Terror*."

It was a good title; Shaul knew that Ma'aravi thought he had successfully taken the bait. The PLO leader was at that time cornered in Beirut, unable to leave the city, which was surrounded by Israeli soldiers and their Christian allies from South Lebanon. He could easily picture the Young Riders—Lotem, and Shimi the Moroccan, and Skinny Moshe the inventor, and Daphna, the only girl in the gang, and Danny the Knife—infiltrating into Beirut in the guise of Arab militias, battling their foes, capturing Arafat and humiliating him . . .

"Do it for the morale of the country," Ma'aravi said. "Do it for the children." He picked up the bill that rested on the table, laid it back covered in a note. "I'll pay you double what you got for the last one, and we'll re-issue the whole series in a new edition."

When they separated, Shaul walked back to his apartment through the darkening city streets, thinking about his creation. The Young Riders had always fought the Arabs. At the height of the series' success their enemy was Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian leader; they fought him numerous times, and always won. The literary establishment had rejected Shaul's work; they called him a war-monger, his work underlined by a dangerous right-wing ideology. And yet, the books were read everywhere, even in the most left-wing of kibbutzim. At one point in the Sixties Ma'aravi had started a Young Riders club for the readers, and gangs formed all over the country, with badges and code-books. Shaul himself had written the manifesto. He smiled as he remembered it now:

The Young Rider is a son of Israel, and committed to its defence

The Young Rider is a pioneer, dedicated to the renewal of the land

The Young Rider is an innocent, and is sworn to protect the innocent

The Young Rider is pure of heart, and pure of deed

The Young Rider is a lover of nature, and will always be kind to animals

The Young Rider shall never forget Masada, and shall never let it fall again

The Young Rider shall never forget the Holocaust, and shall never go willingly to the slaughter

The Young Rider shall always put his friends above himself, and the land of Israel above all

The Young Rider shall work with his hands

The Young Rider shall strive for spiritual and physical perfection

He had cobbled together these Ten Commandments out of similar tenets from youth movements, and from army swearing-in ceremonies. Even then, when he was most caught up in his creation, when the belief in what he was doing was uppermost in his mind, he nevertheless recognised their triteness, their bland generic tone; but he felt, then, that truth could still come out of generalities, and he was proven right: there was a time when it seemed that in nearly every boy's room in the country the Ten Commandments, *his* ten commandments, were hung up prominently on the wall.

That day in the Eighties, he walked through the well-lit streets and thought of Ma'aravi's offer: there was a new generation of children, and Arafat, Shaul thought, was their villain, just as Nasser had been for their parents. Ma'aravi was right: he should write the book. And as he thought this the idea came, of the

Young Riders growing up. They would play a pivotal role in the country's affairs, of course: Lotem would be a high-ranking officer in the army, that seemed certain; and Danny the Knife, who had always been something of a rebel, would become, say, a chief of police. And he thought, I will create a new generation of the Young Riders, to replace the old: a new group of children for these new, equally uncertain times. Their leader would be called . . . he would be called Aviv, he decided. The name meant spring, and that was how he thought of it that night: they would be a new spring, a new promise; they would revitalise him.

When he reached home Na'ama was cooking schnitzels. She turned at the sound of his steps and she smiled. A strand of dark hair fell over her face and her green eyes twinkled; and he went over to her and kissed her, burying his face in the space between her shoulder and neck, inhaling her scent as if trying to preserve it forever. She smelled of perfume and frying oil and healthy, moist earth; and he forgot the proposed book, forgot everything but the need to hold her in his arms, as if, as long as he did so, he could keep her for himself that way forever.

She died of bone cancer. The tumours grew in the hollowness of the bones in her arms, weakening them, eating away at the marrow. He had always liked eating marrow: Na'ama had cooked a *tchulent* for the two of them every Saturday, a large pot of chicken and beef and potatoes and beans, left on the gas overnight from the Friday; she always added three or four large bones into the pot, and when she served the food, all that food for just the two of them, she'd put the bones separately on a plate with the cracked *tchulent* eggs, and Shaul would suck the marrow out of them, holding the bones with his fingers.

The cancer ate her marrow and weakened her bones; one night she woke up in her bed and tried to roll over; and the weight of her body crushed the bones of her arm, and she screamed. He had always thought he would die first: in his youth he smoked, and since his army days he rarely exercised; and he had read somewhere that women had a longer life expectancy than men. Her dying, prolonged and undignified, caught him unprepared. He felt ashamed: at being alive, at being unable to do anything but watch her die. He had wanted to at least remember her the way she was: his Na'ama, her smile, the warmth of her body, her calm voice. But all that remained in his mind was that scream, waking him up in the separate bed on the other side of the room, bringing with it a horror of a kind he had never, could never have written about.

Now, as he got dressed and prepared for this rare excursion, this convention he was to visit, he thought again of Na'ama, and of that meeting long ago with Ma'aravi. He had come home that day fired with enthusiasm, ready to face the typewriter again, to tell the story of the new Young Riders, their battle against the leader of the PLO. Na'ama listened to him talk over the kitchen table, smiling, asking a question into his brief pauses. In answering them the story developed and grew, so that when she went to sleep he remained in the living room, a coffee by his side, and wrote. It had taken only two and a half weeks for him to finish the manuscript of *The Young Riders Against The Master Of Terror*. He could still recall the final chapter, as clear today as it was to him all those years before:

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Uzi's gun did not waver as he pointed it at the terrorist mastermind, the evil leader of the PLO, the man he had sworn to kill.

"You can't shoot me!" Arafat laughed, a demonic laughter that echoed like thunder in the dusty air of the ancient tomb. His dark beard shook with his evil laughter, and his eyes narrowed like two thin blades. "I have sold my soul to the great Djinn and no-one and nothing can stop me now! I am invincible—and I am not afraid of a little boy who is past his bed-time!"

"You killed my friend!" shouted Uzi, remembering the dismembered corpse of Rani Rimon as it swung, horribly mutilated, at the end of a rope, naked and wrapped in the blue-and-white flag of his country.

Rani had saved Uzi's life more times than he could remember: but the one time Rani needed *him*, Uzi was not there. Hot tears of shame strangled his throat now, and only one thought was on his mind: revenge.

Arafat's eyes burned in his head, and his body grew, becoming huge and loathsome, and his hands reached out for Uzi, threatening to swat him away like a fly.

"Stop!" Uzi cried—and threw the useless gun away from him. Something else appeared in his hands—something small and grey and undistinguished.

It was a lamp.

The master terrorist stopped as if frozen. His reaching, questing hands withdrew, and he regarded Uzi with eyes filled with hatred and fear.

"I knew you sold yourself to the Djinn!" cried Uzi, brandishing the fragile little thing precariously, watching with a victorious smile as Arafat's expressions veered wildly between one fear to the next. *The terrorist terrorized at last!* Uzi thought with a grim expression, his smile disappearing. "Which is why I snuck into the caves while my friends, the other Young Riders, occupied your pitiful guards outside! I have stolen the lamp—and the Genie is now my slave!"

"Give it to me," Arafat begged, his body shrinking and ageing rapidly. "Give me the lamp! I beg you!"

But Uzi's heart was cold like the white stones of Jerusalem against the evil terrorist's request. "Never!"

And with a howl, he threw the lamp against the wall of the tomb, breaking it into a thousand tiny pieces!

"Nooo!" cried Arafat.

"Never again will you go against Eretz Yisrael!" Cried Uzi. "Never again will you spill the blood of Jews!"

His eyes full of hatred, Arafat suddenly lunged at the floor. The gun! He took hold of the discarded gun and raised it, aiming at the defenceless Uzi. The master terrorist grinned evilly, and his finger tightened on the trigger . . .

"Too late . . ." Uzi whispered softly. A flash of blue light filled the tomb, and Arafat cried, the gun falling from his fingers. "Mine . . ." howled a horrible, inhuman voice. "You are mine now—and forever!"

Uzi could only watch as a giant figure, dressed in ancient, outlandish clothes, appeared in a puff of smoke. The figure turned to him and a giant eye winked. Then the giant arms reached out and took hold of the feebly struggling Arafat, no longer a master of terror, now just a howling, frightened child, and with a second flash of light the Djinn and his eternal prisoner disappeared, leaving Uzi alone in the dark and silent cave.

"Uzi!" The shouts came from above, and as he lifted his head the rock blocking the entrance was moved and he could see the heads of his fellow Young Riders looking down at him with concern.

"Everything is fine, gang!" shouted Uzi, and into their expectant, respectful faces said, "Yasser Arafat has been defeated!"

The cheers that erupted lifted his heart, and as he began climbing the rope ladder that was lowered to him Uzi knew that he and his friends had, once more, defeated evil and protected their country; once again, the Young Riders were victorious.

THE END.

He remembered typing those words: THE END. They never failed to bring to him a small, private satisfaction, a moment of leaning back, of knowing something, however small, had been achieved, had been completed and done. He remembered the day he finished the book, sitting alone in the apartment; it was around two in the afternoon, and the summer heat lay heavy in the still air. He had got up then and gone to the balcony and stood there for a long moment, looking out. The air lay perfectly still over Tel Aviv, like a polished mirror, and he looked through it and seemed to see the future beneath its shining surface. He had written THE END many times before, for many different stories. But now he looked out over the city the way, he thought, a protector might do, both possessive and protective, a King Arthur to a Mediterranean Guinevere, and he felt suddenly melancholy. He had written the end so easily, with so little care; but now he wondered who would write his end, and how the plot of his life would twist and turn before it reached its culmination, the sentence chopped, the only hint left of his life an ellipsis . . .

It had been a good book, in terms of sales. It launched the new series of the Young Riders, riding, as it were, on the wave of the Lebanon War and the growing prominence of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Throughout the eighties he kept churning out new titles in the series: the Young Riders had fought against the PLO and Hezbollah, captured Nazi war criminals in the jungles of Borneo, hunted a ruthless gang of Russian drug smugglers in Africa (where they hooked up with Dan Tarzan, the Israeli jungle boy) and even flew in a secret Mossad spaceship to Venus, where they battled a race of four-armed telepaths bent on the destruction (for reasons too arcane and torturous to be easily manifest) of the State of Israel.

Ma'aravi was delighted, but it was the children who mattered to Shaul; seeing a child reading *The Young Riders in the Mystery of the Nuclear Spies* on the bus, for instance, in a crumpled, much-worn paperback with M. Aryeh's energetic, even lurid cover depicting a mushroom cloud over Damascus, meant more to him than his bank account, which in any case was hardly growing. He saw little in the way of royalties; Ma'aravi was a firm believer in giving small advances up-front, and was anyway rather secretive when it came to giving details of the number of copies sold, of print-runs and editions. It was a situation Shaul came to resent gradually, and when he did he took his revenge subtly, by writing Ma'aravi into the books as a fat, chain-smoking gangland boss whose evil machinations the Young Riders foiled in book after book, pulling practical tricks on him until he became a figure of ridicule, and was much popular with the younger readers.

If Ma'aravi knew, and if he minded, Shaul never found out. They met less and less in the intervening years, as Ma'aravi became reclusive and handled most of the business by correspondence and phone, hardly ever leaving his basement.

He was still alive, Shaul knew, though he had not seen nor spoken to him in years. He had stopped writing after Na'ama died; the conflicts, the Intifada, the suicide bombs just didn't seem to matter to him enough; the one life he cared about ended not with a bullet or a bomb, though equally stealthily; it came from within the woman he loved, un beholden to ideology or politics, a malady for which there was no cure.

He shook himself now from the burden of memories. He locked the apartment behind him and walked down the stairs, and into the street. It was pleasant outside, the sun not yet high enough to be unbearably hot, and Shaul inhaled the smells of the city, the sea breeze and the Eucalyptus leaves and the car exhaust fumes and the grilling shawarma and frying chips and cigarettes and suntan lotion, and he was suddenly glad. He walked, since it had always been his habit to walk, for he knew the city through his walking; and though he was older now, and slower, still he would not take a bus unless he had to. He had never owned a car, nor did he want one. Walking had always seemed to him an aid to thinking, and on a day like this not to walk would have been nothing less than a sin.

He joined Ibn Gvirol street on his way to the Cinematheque, where the convention was taking place. He walked past the Kings of Israel Square, which was now called Yitzhak Rabin Square; he remembered watching on television the amassed gathering of the political Left there. It had been an autumn day, and he was struck most of all by the earnestness of so many of the people there, their new conviction that a lasting peace could be struck between the nation of Israel and its neighbours; though he disagreed, he was moved by it. He was shocked when the television announced the prime minister had been shot. His first, natural, thought had been that it was the Arabs; when he learned, later, that it was a lone Jew, something inside him had shrunk; it was as if a sentence had been cut short, in mid-flow; as if the prime minister had been punctuated by a sudden full-stop where none should have been. Now the square was empty, and the parking lot where Rabin had been shot was full of cars.

He crossed to the other side of the road, and walked in the shade. As he approached the Cinematheque he heard loud voices carry in the air, amplified by loudspeakers, and as he came nearer he saw that the open courtyard of the building had been turned, bizarrely, into a coliseum, where teenagers, dressed in medieval European costumes, fought each other with plastic swords and pikes.

Is this what we have come to? he asked himself. Already, he regretted coming, had half-decided to turn back, abandon this ill-conceived journey. He, who had, along with his comrades, his fellow writers, turned his back on the years of exodus, on the unwanted, corrupting European influence, in order to create a new, better, Jewish culture of their own, here in the ancient land of their forefathers—he could not now bear to see this degeneration, this unwelcome return to Gentile culture. Nevertheless . . . nevertheless his feet led him onwards, past the young guard on the perimeter of the yard, into the bustling throng of the convention. He walked heavily past the ring of makeshift knights and escaped, at last, into the air-conditioned haven of the Cinematheque building.

"Mr. Canaan?" A bulky youth, his shaved head resembling a carefully polished egg, approached him with an outstretched arm. "We've been waiting for you. I'm Ido, Ido Ziegler, I'm the convention chairman."

"It's nice to meet you, Ido," Shaul said. Hesitant, he shook the proffered hand, which felt hot and sweaty to his touch, so that he had to refrain from wiping his hand afterwards on his trousers. He felt suddenly ashamed of himself, of his response to this young assembly, which, after all, meant well; everyone, he thought, seemed to be enjoying themselves, and even the bemused staff of the Cinematheque seemed to be caught up in the general mood; it felt, he thought, like a holiday from reality.

"Let me just say," Ido Ziegler, convention chairman, said, "what an honour it is to meet you. The first book I ever remember reading was *The Young Riders in Operation Kadash*. I was wondering . . ." Here the egg seemed to glow, momentarily, an unhealthy red, and the boy—a young man, really, Shaul thought, and not even that young, at that, closer to thirty than he was to his teens—reached into the large bag that hung on a strap around his chest, returning with a worn, almost defaced copy of a book Shaul had not even seen in several years, but which he still, with a mixture of embarrassment and pride, recognised. "I was wondering if you might sign this for me."

"It will be my pleasure," Shaul said, taking the book in his hands. He had said it sincerely; for a moment, all his doubts had fled, and he felt, strangely and unexpectedly, at home; felt like a teenager himself, in a world made safe and happy and distant from everything, a world where the hourly news didn't penetrate, where there were no bombs and no Intifada and no politics; a world of kindred spirits, a hallow ground, like a library.

He turned the book in his hands; it was, he saw, one of the few hardcovers produced for library distribution of one of his very early titles, a stand-alone called *With Mattathias the Maccabee Against the Greek Oppressors*, a historical novel he wrote towards the end of the British Mandate in Palestine, when he himself was barely out of his teens. It was a parable, of course, and had been banned, for a

time, under the British. In the book, young Jewish boys fought the Greeks, valiantly, fearlessly, attacking their oppressors with a suicidal energy; one of the episodes, that drew on the book the full might of the establishment, both literary and political, saw one of the boys launch himself, armed, into a crowd of Greek soldiers, attacking them until he was hacked to pieces himself. He remembered now, also, the old song they used to play on the radio, in the new State of Israel, *The Sappers Song*, that detailed the silent sappers marching with their backpacks of explosives down into a sleeping Arab village. *Three more miles*, said the song, *and then dynamite would speak*. They didn't play that song on the radio anymore; he doubted the children today had ever even heard it, but then, he had to admit to himself, it was no longer their song: it belonged now to the enemy, or to the enemy's children.

He shook himself from his thoughts with some effort, and focused on the book; this copy, he saw, even retained its dust jacket, as unlikely as that was, though of course it was torn and stained almost beyond recognition. "Where . . .?" he said, and found that his voice caught in his throat, so that he had to stop and cough before he could speak again. "Where did you find this?"

Ido smiled, though his hands hovered protectively in the air as if aching to withdraw the book from its author's hands, afraid perhaps for its safety. "It is the same copy we had in the kibbutz library when I was a kid. A few years ago I was told they were clearing out a lot of their old books. Throwing them away, if you can imagine!" He shook his head, and Shaul felt a pang of unwanted pain, and looked away. "I was in the army then, in Lebanon, but when I heard I rushed back to the kibbutz, I hitchhiked through half the country to get there on time. The books were already outside, tipped into a rubbish bin. I saved as many as I could. They're almost priceless, now."

"Really," Shaul said, almost whispering. Ido nodded. "A dealer in Tel Aviv offered me five hundred shekels for it only a few months ago. I told him where he can shove his money." He spread his arms, almost apologetically, and added, "Besides, signed it would be worth a lot more."

The feeling of belonging, of peace, abandoned Shaul and, once again, he regretted coming. So this is what it had come to. His work, his books, had become a commodity, not to be read but to be appreciated for their monetary value, on a scale, no, doubt, of rarity and condition, and on the presence, or otherwise, of his signature, or the presence or lack of a dust jacket. He longed, now, to return to his apartment; but now it was too late.

He accepted the pen Ido offered, a Pilot, and wrote in a careful hand on the title page, "To Ido, with best wishes," and signed it.

"Thank you," Ido said, and he took the book back, making it disappear back into his bag; it was, Shaul thought, as if he had made, with one smooth motion, the past itself disappear. Once more he felt old, and restless.

"Come with me," Ido said, oblivious to Shaul's thoughts. He pattered on. "Would you like a drink before we start? We've got a meeting with you scheduled for around two o'clock in the auditorium—the tickets almost sold out, there is a lot of interest in meeting you!—and a signing session straight after that." He began to march away, and Shaul followed him, feeling like Isaac, on the mount with Abraham, waiting for the knife to descend; he felt like a sacrifice, but it was not to God he was being dedicated. It was to the children who had grown up, who no longer needed him or his books, but who still refused to let go, who still owed to him something of their makeup, of the way they perceived the world; he felt he was being presented to them, so that they might finally let go.

On his way back the shadows gathered in the corners of the streets, taking on the shape of secretive, misshapen kids. It had been a strange, disagreeable day; he was overwhelmed by his reception, by the size of the audience waiting for him in the chilly, air-conditioned auditorium. Ido had helped him onto the



stage, where he sat alone, beside a wooden table with a bottle of water and a single glass sitting alone on its surface. He was handed a heavy microphone to speak into, and Ido took a seat beside him, both of them facing the crowd, which looked up to him, young faces curious in a bored, knowing kind of way that made him feel even more exposed, more lost for words than he had ever been in his life. He resented them then, and hated himself for feeling that way: they were, after all, the audience he had written the books for, the children for whom the new Young Riders were created. But he had never been able to relate to the young when they stopped being young, when life scarred them, when the books could no longer act as an anchor for them and they abandoned words for deeds, translated his harmless fantasies into action from which there was no turning back.

"We have with us today," Ido had said, and his words returned from the two speakers on the two sides of the stage, amplified and echoed, "the famous children's writer Shaul Canaan, author of the . . ."

He droned on, reciting Shaul's many novels, moving on to a lengthy biographical description, and Shaul thought suddenly of Na'ama, and the feeling of loss intensified inside him, shifting on the inside of his stomach like an ulcer. Na'ama, he thought, where are you?

But she wasn't there; of course she wasn't. And that evening as he walked home under the lengthening shadows he missed her; missed her with a force that used no words, that had no narrative and no shape, and he knew then that he would not write again. He walked away from the children, while old, unwashed tears made a nest in his throat; and as he stepped down the wide street it seemed to him, momentarily, that he was no longer alone: that his creations had gathered about him like an honour guard, Lotem, and Shimi the Moroccan, and Skinny Moshe, and Daphna, and Danny the Knife, and their faces were no longer the innocent, beautiful faces of *sabres*, drawn those many years ago by M. Aryeh. Now they were old and haggard too, like himself, scarred by the wars, by the occupation, by the changing of the world. They looked at him sombrely, and their eyes were empty and haunted, like the broken windows set in a long-deserted house which had fallen to disrepair; but Shaul just passed his hand over his eyes, warily, and when he had opened them the spectres had vanished, and he walked the rest of the way home in solitude.

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Lavie Tidhar grew up on a kibbutz in Israel and lived in South Africa and the UK. He recently moved to the island-nation of Vanuatu in the South Pacific, where he shares the island of Vanua Lava with an active volcano, crocodiles, and fire ants, which are not nearly as cool as laser-firing sharks. He is the author of [\*An Occupation of Angels\*](#) (Pendragon Press, 2005), [\*HebrewPunk\*](#) (Apex Publications, 2007), and the forthcoming *Cloud Permutations* (PS Publishing). His previous appearances in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our [archives](#). For more on him and his work, see his [website](#).