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Angels Over Israel: Three Slides

by Lavie Tidhar

Author's Note: "I was sitting on an Israeli writers' panel at Icon, the annual Israeli SF convention, and the final question was, to each of us: 'What do you need in order to write the other's stories?'"

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'Easy,' my friend Guy Hasson said when they all got around to discuss what makes a Lavie Tidhar story. 'It needs to have angels in it, and something to do with Israel, and—'

'You know,' I said, 'you've just given me an idea for a story.'

So this is it—they, for there ended up being three, in the end—written in Hebrew, and first published on the Israeli webzine *Bli Panika* (www.blipanika.co.il). They were 500 words each in the Hebrew version, slightly longer in English, and I had fun writing them. Though I'm kind of laying off the angel-dust, for the moment at least..."

Hunting Angels in the Yard

MICHAEL SAW THE ANGELS wherever he turned. Tiny in size, the angels

hovered in the unmoving summer air, their wings rippling in the sun's blaze.

Like butterflies, thought Michael before he tried to pet one of them. The winged creature attacked him then, its little face twisting in an animalistic mask of anger. Long sharp teeth bit into Michael's finger and returned bloodied.

I won't cry, Michael told himself over and over again, I won't cry. And then surprised himself with the composure with which he hit the angel until the tiny body fell to the pavement. Then Michael stepped on it.

He remembered the sound the angel's body made, like a balloon emptying gradually of air. His foot rose and fell until a black, oily stain remained alone on the ground. Michael had to wash his shoes in the tap of the housing estate's great yard: but very quickly he found out it didn't matter, since no one knew about the angels and could not see them, or their remains.

Since that first time Michael repeated his actions many times: he wandered the great yard and hunted angels.

Michael's mother, Mrs. Tavori, worked long hours. His father, Mr. Tavori, was killed in the line of duty. Michael remembered the embarrassed-looking officer who used those words one late-night hour in the flat's small living room. He stood in the small room, his face tired, his black hair thinning. But how Mr. Tavori—a shoe-seller whose military role was as a supply sergeant—was killed, that the officer could not explain. There was a firing accident, he said, but how and why, that he couldn't say.

Killed in the line of duty. The words became a kind of rosary in Michael's head, the syllables beads he moved from side to side. He remembered the sound the angels' bodies made against the window: they rose in a cloud at the sound of the words and tried to break into the flat, beating themselves against the glass. He collected a heap of bodies from the grass the next morning, fallen angels.

In the mornings Michael prepared breakfast for himself and then went down to the yard to play. The old automobile lying on its back, lacking wheels or windows, was first, followed by the brook that ran from the estate into an invisible underground tunnel. Michael played in the brook despite the smell that sometimes rose from the black water.

Sometimes he submerged the angels he had caught in the water, holding them against the bottom until they stopped fighting and became silent dolls in his hands.

He played with the dolls, creating worlds in which angels fought each other like winged knights, and others where they were fighter planes that left curving lines of smoke across the sky.

Michael's nights were dark. The same officer who reported his father's death now visited his mother in the nights. His face remained embarrassed. In the darkness

of night his grunts changed to the coughs of a long-term smoker. The angels penetrated the flat then and circled in the air like drunks, suffusing Michael's room with the scent of purity.

Michael hit at them but they would not leave him alone, and finally he hid underneath the blanket and tried to not believe in angels. He knew most people believed in them even though they couldn't see them. It did not occur to him to ask who the angels themselves believed in.

In the mornings Michael prepared himself breakfast and then went down to the yard to play. He hit the angels with a broken table leg, the bat whispering through the air before hitting. He collected the silent bodies and made them into dolls.

Michael played with the silent angel dolls; and he dreamed of a world where he himself was an angel, and he floated alone in the blue skies, holy and pure, and hunted clouds.

A Year of Angels

THE BLIND ANGEL stood on the corner of Rehov Ha'atzmaut, Independence Street, his fingers spread before him in a silent plea for help. A chasid walking past threw a coin into the offered hand absent-mindedly, and the angel's blind, pale face turned and followed him as he passed through the crowds of people.

It was a good year for army officers and politicians; a bad year for angels.

The angel's face turned now towards the sun, and he began to march down the street, the stumps of his wings moving helplessly. As much as it can be said, he felt frightened amongst the crowds.

Perhaps he remembered earlier days, years that came and went like pine needles falling. Remembered the forced assembly, the soldier who hit his brother, Raphael, with the butt of an Uzi. Gabriel's public hanging in the square, his delicate neck broken inside a rolled-up New Party flag. Perhaps he remembered an attempt to escape: to spread wings and fly into the open sky.

Perhaps he remembered the helicopters that waited for them there, in the sky. Remembered, maybe, the bullets that severed his wings, and his final fall to earth.

The soldiers began calling them, the survivors, the fallen. From a legend, a myth, an ancient story they have become a joke. Lame, they were no longer scary, became subject to ridicule, things children pointed at in the streets and sometimes threw stones.

But those were other times, and who knows, after all, the way an angel's alien mind works? Who knows what he thought of, if he thought at all, while he made his lonely way through the human streets, searching ... for what? A place to sleep at night? A covered entrance to a block of offices or flats, where he could lie covered in newspapers? Who knows what they want, those refugees from God.

The angel, anyhow, remained expressionless, but—perhaps instead of an answer—began to climb the Carmel. How and when that king of the skies became a resident and beggar of the city of Haifa I do not have an answer for. But he began to march, heavily, stubbornly, up the mountain, and as became obvious almost immediately, he was not alone. As he climbed more and more angels joined him, appearing from every hidden corner, putting scars and ravages on display.

It was the first time since the end of the war that such a crowd of angels had gathered. The authorities became concerned. Haifa University at the summit of the Carmel was evacuated immediately, but a small group of students remained behind and reported on the unfolding events with an ancient radio transmitter.

Past the university it seemed as if whole nation of angels had appeared out of nothing at the heights of the Carmel. That same army now began to march down the road towards the Druze village of Osafiah.

Helicopters, some of them media, appeared at this stage, circling in the sky like bees, and army units that a mere half-hour ago were on a training exercise on the slopes of the mountain now surrounded the army of angels but didn't stop it.

The angels marched down the village and continued on their way. They did not stop in Osafia and not in Daliat-al-Carmel: and only slowly did it become apparent to the watching audience what their ultimate destination must be.

It was a good year for television presenters and journalists. A bad year for angels.

The army evacuated the angry monks before the angels reached the Muchraka. The soldiers waited amidst the trees and looked nervously towards the ancient monastery that sat at the top of the Carmel, in the place where, it was said, the Prophet Elijah fought with the priests of Ba'al.

With no words the angels passed through the open gate and climbed the stairs, to the open observatory on the monastery's roof. Their bare feet moved in silence across the cold stone floor.

The blind beggar marched forward with his brothers. What did he feel, there, in the place where heaven and earth meet? Did he raise his hand, to touch the skies? Did he spread his broken wings and try, together with his brothers, to take to the sky one last time, to touch God?

The TV helicopters waited for an answer, and in the forest the soldiers, too, waited. It was a good year for drama, and for military courts.

The blind angel turned to the angel beside him. "Be'ezrat Ha'shem," said the angel. *With the help of God.*

It was the year the angels...

Angel Kind

THE FLIGHT FROM CYPRUS was fifty minutes late. Ze'evi stepped between the doors of the airport to the hot air outside, lit himself a cigarette and dreamed of a shower. An angel with drooping wings, his white feathers faded to a dirty brown, stood leaning on a Subaru with a similar colour and called out to him, arousing from his thoughts. "Need a taxi?"

"Yes," said Ze'evi. Something in the angel's face affected him. He had a demure, innocent expression—the expression of an angel. He threw the cigarette on the pavement and entered the taxi, sitting in front by the driver. "Tel Aviv," he said, and gave the angel an address in the centre. Not just a flat—a house. Ze'evi was a successful man, after all, but the recent situation with the business ... not to mention his wife.

"Where did you come back from?" asked the angel. He drove fast through the airport gates, his wings pressed against the seat. They pressed against the seat like birds trying to escape, and every so often the nearest wing to Ze'evi jerked so passionately that the feathers reached to delicately tickle his cheek.

"Cyprus," said Ze'evi, and into the driver's silence added, "big sale of water meters."

"Cyprus, huh?"

"Cyprus," said Ze'evi.

Silence settled in the car. The angel's feathers continued to stroke Ze'evi's skin. Their touch made him feel alternately hot and cold.

"How long have you been working in taxis?" he asked.

"A few months." He hesitated and looked at Ze'evi with eyes open and clear, full of infinity. "When I don't drive clients I dance at the Fallen Angel."

Silence settled again, broken only when the taxi stopped and Ze'evi asked, hesitantly, "How much do I owe you?" and the driver answered him, and Ze'evi paid.

"The Fallen Angel?" he asked quietly, leaning through the car window, his face close to the driver's.

The angel nodded. "Come tomorrow, Friday. I'll be there," he said and drove off, leaving Ze'evi alone on the pavement.

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All day Ze'evi thought about the angel, and at night, when he could no longer take the silence at home, the whiskey bottle and the single glass on the table, the dire television programs, he stood and decided to go for a ride in the car. Without any pre-conceived plans he nevertheless found himself at the entrance to that same seedy club, the Fallen Angel, in that area where Ibn Gvirol St. meets the stench of the

Yarkon river.

He paid the entrance fee and entered the darkened building. A heavenly choir filled the club's air and with it came cigarette smoke and the faint whiff of purity. He sat by the bar and ordered himself a glass of Glenfiddich, a double shot with one single, lonely ice cube—he was a successful man, Ze'evi, and knew how to behave—and watched the dancers that crowded the stage before him.

The angels circled like drunks on the packed stage, their naked bodies rippling in the light of the rays that suffused them in unexpected bursts. Their wings tried to open their length but failed, and the feathers of one angel stroked those of another and passed through them a kind of excited current that made the experience of watching them greater. Ze'evi watched the angels, hooked, his fingers moving in rhythm with the heavenly choir, the drink forgotten by his side.

“You came.”

He heard the voice close to his ear. Breath on the back of his neck made him turn. Beside him stood the angel from the taxi, naked but for a pair of short, torn jeans.

“I came,” said Ze'evi, and in the silence that seemed to him to be the opening of a door that had been closed all his life, let his private angel take him by the hand, and lead him without effort towards the private cabins at the back.