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The Roots of the Cult of Vengeance Lie Deep in the Land

by Amir Eshel

Yoram Kaniuk, *Tigerhill*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad/
Siman Kriah, 1995. 197 pp.



YORAM KANIUK has repeatedly shown that he is a multi-faceted writer, but his latest novel is especially surprising. It is, above all, a thriller that grips from the first page and creates intense suspense which is not relieved until the complex riddle at its heart is solved.

The setting is Tel Aviv in the 1990s. On the fateful night on which the story opens, Hadar did not feel like leaving the house. Although Uriel, her good friend of many years, invited her to go out with him, she stayed at home, curled up in bed. That night her sleep is disturbed by a horrendous nightmare, and in the morning she lies in bed, sweating and terrified, and tries to make sense of it. She can remember fragments of the dream and is tormented by the idea that these are not figments of her imagination, the product of her subconscious, but a chilling reality in whose shadow she is fated to live. She tries in vain to write down what she remembers, and she is unable to translate the dream into words thereby, perhaps, providing herself with a rational explanation to solve the riddle of her past.

Hadar is young and vital and knows how to enjoy what Tel Aviv, "the city that never stops," has to offer. She walks about its streets, listening to Don Giovanni on her Walkman. Having recently finished her military service, she has not yet decided what to do with her life. She lives in a rented flat in south Tel Aviv, a lively and newly discovered part of the city, where in many of its crumbling buildings live young people addicted to the pace of the metropolis. She supports herself by working in a bookstore on Dizengoff Street, while trying to get taken on as a photographer by one of the city's popular newspapers. Though she has never given a thought to what is actually preserved when the shutter clicks—what the medium of photography represents—now awakening from her awful dream, she finds herself grappling with these questions.

The next day, still distracted and upset, Hadar meets a writer whom she is to photograph for the newspaper, though she did not care for his last book. He is not named, but the features of Yoram Kaniuk are discernible through the intertextual masks. Both the writer and her talk with him trouble her greatly. The next morning she hears that a bomb had gone off in the Peleus Café, and two young people had been killed. The unease of the previous day now turns into dread. While the police are convinced that the explosion was caused either by terrorists or criminals, and conduct their inquiries accordingly, Hadar believes that in some mysterious way the explosion is connected to the dream and thus to her own life.

This is the story around which Yoram Kaniuk's excellent thriller revolves. Hadar tries to get to the meaning of these events, approaching her friend, Uriel, and the mysterious figure of the writer, but they can't help her. She wakes up at night feeling

that she is covered in blood. She is helped by Muki, a reporter who works on the same newspaper. Shy and introverted, he attracts the confused young woman through his wit and laconic speech. Theirs is a delicate love story, hesitant and full of doubts. Even in love, it is evident that discovering the truth hidden in the recesses of herself—a theme which appears in many of Kaniuk's books—will not give Hadar real peace. In reality, as in the dream, the search itself is the object, the epitome of hope that the pain and apparent meaninglessness that envelop everything, nevertheless have a purpose.

Accompanied by Uriel and Muki, Hadar returns to Kfar Avraham, the picturesque village where she had first encountered Ben, the book's hidden hero. She meets Meshulam, a marvellous, verbose old man, whose life story is the story of the Land of Israel, and succeeds in reconstructing the events of the day when her grandfather, Grisha, took her, aged four, on his first visit to the village after many years. On that fateful day her cheerful, hedonistic grandfather first met Ben, his son, the product of his tempestuous affair with Rivka Yitzhaki. Ben's primeval anger against his biological father leads to a bitter quarrel, at the end of which Yonathan, Ben's son, finds his death under the wheels of an old railway carriage. The blood in Hadar's dream was, therefore, not without meaning, because a moment before the monstrous iron wheels ended his life Yonathan got Hadar away from the tracks. This dramatic scene, in which Meshulam enables Hadar to remember the event and its tragic end, is masterfully depicted.

In Kfar Avraham it becomes clear to Hadar that the explanation for the bombing of the café in Tel Aviv is to be found in her own life. She herself was meant to die in the explosion. She understands that behind it lies the story of the stormy and forbidden love of Grisha and Rivka, a story of sacrifice and betrayal, intense pain and wild passion for revenge that led, twenty years later, to the event of the previous night at the Peleus Café. Fortunately for her, Hadar stayed at home that night, but after her visit to Kfar Avraham her sense of relief is darkened by the knowledge that the young people who were killed died instead of her.

Step by step Hadar, Uriel and Muki get closer to the person who planned the act of vengeance—Ben. Powerful and mysterious, his biography contains elements from the collective chronicles of the families whose children were born into the enter-

ideological compromise or human complexity, that the origins of a cult of vengeance may be found—a cult which does not stop at sacrificing the children of the beloved country. Ben, who detested Grisha, his light-hearted, self-indulgent father, did not hesitate to wreak a personal revenge which, in a sense, was also a collective ideological revenge, by murdering young people in Tel Aviv—people whose only crime was their chance presence in a café—an icon of the empty leisure culture. When Hadar, accompanied by the police, arrives at Ben's hotel room, he expresses no remorse about having caused the death of innocent people. From his window he looks out at the sea, at the sad colours of the sunset, which also symbolize the decline of the world he and his sons believed in unreservedly. He wants only one thing: to sing the song of the Zionist pioneers, "The Fields of Jezreel."

Tigerhill can be read as a thriller, flavoured by Kaniuk's rich style, which tends towards the fantastic. A reader who enjoys looking for allusions and links to his other books can do so, or simply be swept along by the pace of the plot. However, when the complex and typically Kaniukian structure is examined in the light of the events of November 4, 1995, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, *Tigerhill* takes on a greater meaning, lying at the heart of the public discourse which has been taking place in Israel for the past twenty years. Ben's willingness to sacrifice lives on the altar of vengeance and his mourning for the old Israeli pioneering spirit are directly related to the awful blast which shook the lives of young people making their way in the changing reality of Israel. Those same personal-ideological drives which arise from the depths, full of contempt for life in today's world, destroy not only the fiction of *Tigerhill*, but in reality, all possibility of peace and conciliation with the past. Ben's character, bound as it is to the song "The Fields of Jezreel," may be, in a certain sense, reminiscent of the character of Yigal Amir. In *Tigerhill*, along with his compelling plot, Yoram Kaniuk asks existential questions similar to those which were asked after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. They turn the book into a special kind of experience. ■

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