

M. M. M. Hayes

Lay of the Land

The monochrome wastes of the Negev surrounded the outpost and stretched away, a shimmering flatness with not a tree for cover. Sun burned everything the color of sand. Somewhere out there was a war, Lieutenant Fintzi reminded himself on his first day of duty with the tank division, two days after graduation from medical school in Tel Aviv. Ready, and willing, Fintzi regarded with disappointment the huddle of makeshift buildings and straggle of dirt-colored soldiers lazing in the shade of dusty tanks or playing chess in the barracks. At the pre-fab infirmary, a fifty-year-old sergeant on his annual month of duty studied Fintzi through lens so thick his eyes looked like pinholes. A boyish mechanic peered out from under a truck and Fintzi wondered if the kid was old enough to shave. The same boy told Fintzi he'd enlisted because he'd been given a choice: jail or the army. The only body not in slow motion was a sergeant kneeling in the gravel road playing with his scrawny redheaded kitten. The armored division wasn't supposed to have pets, but things seemed pretty relaxed. Fintzi wasn't sure where a kitten could have come from, maybe just wandering in off the desert? Maybe the sergeant smuggled it here under his shirt? Everyone seemed to know about the cat... but so what?

By the second day, Fintzi had the lay of the land. The able-bodied men had gone off to fight and, basically, the army had put him behind to run the medical depot, with—much as he hated to be unkind, nevertheless—the losers. Of course, he could see that no one knew what to make of him either: the new lieutenant, dubbed with authority, a city innocent with one day in the army under his belt.

That morning, the sergeant saluted Fintzi and said, "Lieutenant, sir, my kitten, it's acting weird. Crazy. Sir." The sergeant pointed to his cat. "See?" Sure enough, it ran cockeyed and spastic, jumping all over. "Can't you give it something?"

What was this? "Give it what?" Fintzi had trained to save lives. "I'm a gynecologist."

"I don't know. Morphine. Something to quiet it down."

"You want me to inject morphine into this crazy cat?" Fintzi said. "Who is going to catch it and hold it down?" The sergeant looked stricken and started off after

the kitten, so Fintzi yelled, “No, wait. It could have rabies. We can’t have it biting or scratching someone. I think what you have to do is kill it.”

The sergeant stopped chasing the cat and stared at Fintzi. “Kill? Me, Kill?”

“Yes, kill it. Before it bites someone.”

“No. No, I can’t kill my kitten.”

Now this was a problem for the newly posted Lieutenant. He had given his first order, and the sergeant says, No? “Yes, you can. I’m the lieutenant and you’re the sergeant and I’m ordering you to kill the cat.”

The sergeant approached then, looking his most reasonable, but talking very fast. “No, see this is a medical problem. That’s why I came to *you*. You’re the doctor, and something’s wrong with my kitten.”

So then Fintzi saw. *He* had to kill the cat.

By now soldiers under trucks and tarps had stopped what they were doing to watch the two men and the little half-starved calico cat. Fintzi went to his office and got his pistol. If this animal was rabid or something, rabies was not a small medical problem fifty kilometers out in the middle of the desert. The *cure* for rabies could kill a man.

Outside again, Fintzi found the animal, jumping somersaults in a streak of red circles. He shot at it, but the bullet zipped one way and a blaze of red shot off in the other, scrambling over a troop carrier. Fintzi shot two more times and by now soldiers had come to the windows, or crawled out from under machinery to see him try to kill this kitten. Cat. By then too, Fintzi had lost the slippery beast.

He checked the aisles between the tanks, and finally got down on his hands and knees and peered beneath rows of vehicles. He saw it, curled in a ball under an oversized wheel. Careful not to flatten any tires, Fintzi shot two more times. The cat disappeared in sand spray and Fintzi crouched lower, cheek in the dirt, rear in the air. He scrutinized every dark corner, but no cat, no *part* of a cat. He pushed himself up with one hand and stood.

As he brushed off his knees and straightened up, he faced a half-circle of unfamiliar faces betraying not a glimmer of sympathy, poker faces seeming to hold a collective breath, waiting to see what Fintzi would do next. The men loved their pet and here stood this new officer, who could order them to do things they didn’t want to do, and he was trying to kill their kitten.

Fintzi was no fool. He realized that the cat had become the underdog! The entire post seemed to be weighing this officer’s performance, and meanwhile the animal had disappeared. Shuffling through the sand in silence, two men walked back to the barracks. Another followed. Fintzi’s cheeks felt hot. From a cluster of mechanics, Fintzi heard a snigger. Yes, no wonder. Fintzi couldn’t even kill a cat. He had heard stories of soldiers getting rid of laggards out in the field.

“Just a minute,” he announced, and returned to his office. He found his M-16 in its corner, put in a clip of bullets and set out to find the enemy. The cat, when it saw him, went berserk and streaked off the post. Fintzi in pursuit ran broken field as he fired his M-16, the spray of bullets spitting up sand in little puffs. But the M-16 was harder for the animal to handle and a third spurt of bullets caught white legs from behind and blew them up into the air to fall, spattered across gravel, one side of a tank and a bank of sand. The pieces still jumped—delayed reaction, Fintzi knew: nerves spasming and releasing—but he shot again and blood and fur spewed over sand and a pile of assembly parts until all settled into silence. Fintzi turned to the crowd and said sheepishly, “I mean, this is too bad. That was a nice cat.”

No one said a word. They all stared at the mess—sometimes looking quickly at Lieutenant Fintzi, then away, no one meeting his eyes. This was something that needed fixing.

“Pick up the cat,” he told them. Which was hard to do, but they did it. “Don’t touch it with your bare hands.” They scooped up the pieces and put them in an ammunition box. Then Fintzi said, “We’ll bury it.” He could see they liked that. A couple of them laughed, others scratched their heads. He asked the rabbi to say a few words, but the burly chaplain refused, waving him off, so Fintzi announced, “Full military honors.” The sun rose higher, biting the back of their necks. “Rifle salute.” Two soldiers fired rifles and men got to laughing. Fintzi nodded, satisfied. Sun burned down on the cluster of grey buildings, mechanics went back to work under cover from the heat. Morale improved.

M. M. M. HAYES has lived in the Negev desert and the story here was fashioned after an overheard anecdote. Hayes’s fiction has been anthologized in *New Stories from the South*, and *2Plus2: An International Anthology*, and also won a number of prizes including the Katherine Anne Porter Prize from *Nimrod*. Short fiction has appeared in commercial as well as literary magazines publications as disparate as *Gallery* and *Redbook*, to *Hawaii Review* and *North American Review*. Currently, Hayes is editor and publisher of *StoryQuarterly*.