Novel Exerpt by Atar Hadari

Wordrunner *e*chapbooks | March 2013

Our Place 1

Ears 6

Possession 14

About Atar Hadari 23

The title story “Our Place” was previously published
as part of Atar Hadari’s one-man show
“Three Sides of a Fence,” in *Jewish Quarterly*.

Wordrunner eChapbooks
March 2013

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Our Place

Did I tell you how the theatre here got started? Just because you’re not in London, you shouldn’t think you’ve left behind civilization, you know. That is what I thought when I first got here, with Sarah, long before she was Gadi’s mother, but it was not the case. We used to do plays in the old dining room. You know, of course, the old dining room was not what you see here, the new dining room. There was no steel — stainless steel — on the roof and no windows, even with wire mesh. We had a roof made of tin — boiled alive in the summer — and steel bars on the windows — what we called windows — so the Arabs wouldn’t get in. But we put on great shows. I played a part in one or two myself.

Tevye, I played. The milk man. Though I never worked the cow shed myself. You know the play? When Tevye goes, with his family, driven off by the pogroms, the non-Jews, he stops and says goodbye to the cat, left all alone on the mantelpiece. They loved that in the dining room. It brought the house down.

I didn’t act, you understand. None of us could act. We didn’t come from the camps where they did theatre, music. Some camps, I am told, had interpretative dance. Ours just killed us. You just learned to steal fish out of the bottom of the pot. You didn’t get meat in the camps, you died. You had to get up front in the long line. Whatever it took. So we learned to use a long spoon. You see that sometimes with the members of the kibbutz. They want all the necks out of the bottom of the pot on Friday night and bring back to their table more than they can eat — it’s like that here on Friday night. Was, even before we had meat. Even when we had just the steel bars, people worried about getting extra bread.

But the Arabs, you see, had no such worries. They lived here, had their oil, their olives, sheep maybe. We used to get bread all along the way from Jerusalem and they would throw it to the ground from the wagon when it came and it was white with dust, not flour. We couldn't trust the Arabs to sell us bread, you see. But then we grew our own olives and they had to come pick our crops. They have quick hands, you see. We couldn't trust them to bake our bread. But they drove it. One of them did.

Mahmoud, that's what his name was, drove a mule and a cart, all the way to Bet Shaan from Jerusalem — once, twice a week. He owned a little land. His grandfather's, I think he said. Some olive trees, a cow. Three children, four — enough that he had to ride up and down, not milk one cow to fill their mouths. We trusted him. Almost. He never spent the night here. Why would any Arab spend the night within our gates? But he brought our bread from the bakers in the city, and we gave his children rights to swim in the spring, even when we fenced all this land around here in. They still come, once a year or so, it's a long way now, the road-blocks and check-points stop cars, what can you do.

When Mahmoud lost an arm — I tell you — we rallied round like he was one of ours. I gave him the shirt off my back to stop the bleeding. (It wasn't my shirt actually, it was Motke's originally, but we share everything here, still.) So Mahmoud is lying there with his arm bleeding because the cart overturned when we were all so hungry by the time he came that we jumped all at once on top of it to get the bread. (I told you, it wasn't finishing school at the camps, you learned to eat or you died of what you hadn't learned.) And Mahmoud is lying there with my shirt around his arm, a pool of blood the size of Yavne under his side, and he says to me: "Do Jews not like Arab bread?"

I laugh and say it's nothing personal, the doctor (our doctor, we paid for him) will be there soon. We just have to eat kosher bread. And what did we come to this country for if not to stand on our own two feet? He says he understands. The doctor came after some hours. It was a shame about the arm. But Mahmoud always said to the children he didn't lose his whip arm. That was a boon, with the horse. Some animals don't understand any language but brute force.

He wasn't bitter, I can say. We were worried, his people would make trouble — an eye for an eye — some people — non-Jews — are not civilized. He kept his horse. Kept bringing the carts of bread — now twice a week. He had to ride now with the boy — to hold the reins while Mahmud threw the whip — but he did make a small profit, when it was two bread loads instead of one. We had babies.

When we did the last show, I don't recall now why I wasn't asked to play the part. It was a turbulent time in the kibbutz, a lot of change. The government had been set up. Independence. New flags. New song. The war, of course, when the Arabs didn't get to throw us in the sea. The government said the Arabs would be safer living together, after the armistice. There were some hard feelings. Not between us, you understand. We always were on good terms with our neighbors, if we had to let them in. It's just — after those Arabs ran away to Jordan to wait for us to die and then come back — some of us thought those Arabs that hadn't run should be made to pay. So we suggested — those of us who were civilized — and the government — that they all move lower down into the same valley — and sell us — in this case the kibbutz — their family land.

I could have told him — if he'd asked me — what family land did my parents get a chance to sell? Out in the middle of the night with a suitcase and two bars of soap, into a train ride for three days and at the end of it ten piles — one for suitcases, one for the crutches, one for false teeth — finally, your underclothes. Then you went to the showers. Unless you were strong enough to work, and could get meat.

So I went, to explain to him. I was asked — perhaps because he bled his arm away into my shirt (though it was Motke's, originally.) I was asked to go and explain to him why

we couldn't keep him on to drive the bread. And needed his land. And that was the night they did Tevye again in the dining room, and I couldn't revive my heart-rending portrayal of the man saying farewell to his hearth and home and cat, because I had another part.

Mahmoud's house was grassy. I had never been there before actually, though I knew where it was. The grass ran right up to it. The grass was deep, deep as your waist. And he was sitting, feeding cheese to his two dogs. Small dogs I think they were, not really much use to guard. His children must have been milking, because he was alone with his dogs.

And now I think of it, he really didn't use it well, that plot of land. There were the trees, olive, sure – and the pasture for the cows- but did he really need the grass — all of that grass — right up to his waist — all around the house? Really, it was wasteful. And in the middle of it, that spring of sweet water. What a waste, just growing grass.

I told him, straight out, "Mahmoud, we can't protect you from progress."

"Have a coffee," he said. "You want some cheese? I have this and it's too hot to keep and the dogs will get fat and spoilt, but they like it. This is the cheese no-body bought. No Jews buy Arab cheese anymore — even on the non-religious kibbutz — why Natan? Are they keeping kosher now, too?"

I said that the government felt — would continue to feel for some time — that their greater good — his and his family's — in fact their safety — would be best served by enclosure among their own kind, in a protective environment.

"Is that why Jews like to live inside a fence?" Mahmoud said.

He didn't offer me coffee again before I left. He told me what his dogs' names were, as he gave them the cheese. I met his children as I walked out of his yard. One of them I knew well, from the cart. I felt his arm. He made a muscle. "Muscles like margarine," I said, "But rock hard, from the freezer."

"What's a freezer?" he said.

I said they'd have a freezer soon enough, when we bought their land.

We bought the land at a fair price. At least, as much as we could afford when there was nothing on the land but grass and a few olives, and now not even anyone to frisk the trees for fruit.

The spring has turned a little salty with the years. I think we drain it dry, or nearly dry, too often. Salt water came up from the deep. So now we use the water for fish pools — they like salt water, those big fish — and I told you, we learned how to dig fish out of the communal pot.

I saw Mahmoud's daughter last time they came. I never see the son, she said he turned political. Mahmoud's daughter — she's now as old as I was when I turned my back on her father — she tells me she nurses him. He's blind now, cataracts. Still got one good arm. Carves things for the tourists. But the tourists don't come since the bombs. "Like the Jews all over again," he says. And he laughs. At least she says he laughs. She doesn't laugh. We had his blood all over the yard outside the dining room for a few days in '46. I could show you where. They park the motorcycles there now. I miss his laugh.

I gave up acting after that great revival that I missed. I do not have the range, I fear, to play more than a fairly straightforward person convincingly. My Tevye, you understand, was a portrait of my father. He would cry at the smallest thing. Me crying over that cat I was leaving was really my father crying for the dining room china set when we left Berlin. He lasted hours in the camp. I saw his glasses falling in a pile of stainless steel arms and bridges and then I saw him raise his arms for another Jew to help him drop his shirt. I don't cry, ever, in real life. It was acting, you see, to leave that cat. But Mahmoud laughed like a wild beast. I miss having him throw the bread down in the yard so I could catch the first piece in my hand and raise it high over my head and laugh like there was nothing else you could ever want.

Ears

There was no train then — from Bet Shean to Tel Aviv, or anywhere else in this long and narrow country. There was barely a road — and what there was, was bad. Arabs. Could be Arabs out there. Or Jews, run off from different kibbutzim and trying to scrape by. You didn't know who your friend was. It wasn't easy, on or off kibbutz, staying alive and believing in God. Not that it's easy now, but there was no train then. No track for a train, either. And no engines. We had horses — one horse, usually. And we had wagons, when we came, in our tents, in '37, and the Bet Shean valley was a paradise when it rained then — literally, you could see all of the pools, hundreds of little pools, all flowing together, till the whole valley was a great walking water beast, hauling its white skin toward the river. But since then it stopped raining, for our sins. That and the industry down south, Tel Aviv, I don't have to tell you. They cough so much smoke, here in Afula we have back ache. So we pray more. But the rain does not come. And the walking water is a memory I tell my children and that maybe they tell theirs but it's a memory and that's as far as it will ever go, two mouths, maybe three and then just dust.

Anschel — he was a one could make the rain flow with his prayers. But he left the kibbutz in '38? '39? I don't remember. The rain stopped altogether for a few weeks after that.

Anschel was a leaver, one of the first. Thirty nine, I think. Before they even started killing Jews, he was on his way back, in case he missed the party. He didn't miss it. He arrived just in time to have his passport withdrawn and his family assets confiscated after he met his mother at the train in Warsaw. (His mother was in the furrier business after his father died and

Anschel ran off to Israel.) His father was a great furrier. Silver rabbit was his specialty. The finest silver hats in all Berlin, if you believed Anschel, and we didn't know any different. Certainly in Emek Bet Shean we were not comparing fur bonnets. If he said his father made a rabbit's foot into the Russian Tsarina's favourite outdoor cap I wasn't old enough when I got out here to the desert to disbelieve it. Only he did like to talk about the hats, while lying there in the tent, sweating. This was '38, to get to sleep, you poured a bucket of water over yourself inside your few feet of canvas sheet at night and laid down wet, hoping to be away before the heat dried you off and you itched from the flies again. But Anschel loved fur hats, loved to talk about them, loved to list all the colors of the silver rabbits, the grading of the fur from sterling silver to scrap. He would describe the stitching in a rabbit's ear to turn it from an ear into an ear muff. If you would listen. Even lying there at night, shivering with malaria or shaking off the last bucket I poured on him, he wouldn't stop: "The ears on a great white," he'd say, "The ears on a rabbit would make the flaps so soft, you'd feel the rabbit was nibbling your cheeks with its soft snout when you pulled down the muffs and didn't hear the world, all that snow crunching."

I would have given my tent for a handful of snow — and here he was talking winter wear. I ask you, is that a cooperative attitude? Or even an attitude to have in a cooperative? Eventually he had to leave. I mean, we didn't force him. We said, "Anschel — didn't he have summer wear? Or an autumn selection maybe? You know, sandals?"

No. "Hats. Fur hats. That's what my Appa was. A man in rabbit ears. More rabbit ears he had than a whole warren. And he knew how to send a ferret down to get them out. Though of course, he used a goy for that."

One day somebody said that maybe Anschel should think about the cities. And guess who it was they asked to bring it up with him? Me. Just because I shared a tent with him and he talked on and on to me about the ears more than anybody.

It's not like we were close, it's not like they were doing him a favor. It's just — you know how it is — everybody wants the sick cow dead but nobody wants to pull the trigger. At the end of the day after a lot of talking, all of a sudden everybody wants to be part of a firing squad, not a lone assassin, or actually, they'd rather hire a lone assassin, but they'd prefer not to use the money, so why not just ask somebody else — somebody you can say must mind more than all the rest of us put together — Natan — he shares that idiot's tent doesn't he? He must hate him more than anybody.

Well, actually, I didn't. I even got to be a little bit interested in the whole range of colours — you know back in Berlin I was actually thinking of being a tailor before they shipped me on the boats, so all this talk of stitching was kind of like ice-cream in the hot night, you couldn't taste it but you could almost see it melt, running down the glass. You know? I didn't mind so much, after I got over the fact that fur and deserts do not go together, but then again do Jews and deserts go together really, even now, forget what they tell you in the Bible?

So when they asked me, first time, in this very dining room, over the meat-less stew, as you know they do, I played dumb, didn't understand, and when they sent someone a second time I also found some reason not to know what they were talking about but finally it came to a meeting, the one Anschel was not invited to and then it was more difficult. I don't know where he went. Perhaps he was down by the spring, swatting away the rats, because it was infested then and not much cop for romance but maybe he was there. I thought he might be there when I got back to the tent anyway, because there was no light on. Usually we had a light on, to read by, to talk about the fur. I pulled the tent flap open and then I heard him, breathing.

"How was the meeting?" he said, scraping his hand across his stubble. He had this way of running his hand over his face before he talked to you, as if he was still preparing to address the staff at his father's factory.

"It wasn't really what you'd call a meeting. More an ad-hoc gathering. No minutes were kept."

"Oh absolutely. If no minutes were kept, in Germany we called that a chat. Did you all have a chat?"

What could I say to that? I sat down on my canvas bed. It creaked. I could still hear him breathing, in the dark.

"You know, a few of the members were talking. A few others were listening. Nobody did too much listening, but some did a lot of talking. In that sense I suppose we all did meet. You know what it's like Anschel, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"I said absolutely not. Absolutely. No. Not at all. I will not be part of it."

"So why were you not here? In the tent? Why were you at the meeting where they didn't take minutes?"

What could I tell him?

"Anschel, I live here."

"Really Natan?" He rolled over on the camp bed and turned away.

"Where do I live?" he said over his shoulder.

When I offered to pour a bucket of water over him, he didn't stir.

It wasn't ideological, exactly, though many things were, of course. Usually when I was not involved. Members would spend hours discussing if it was bourgeois to salt an egg. Let alone how many hours before Sabbath you had to cook it to eat it on the day. Did it have time to cool before Sabbath came? Nobody knew, and we didn't have a rabbi. We were just us. And we weren't relaxed, you understand, having escaped, even without knowing what it was behind us, that we had escaped. That's how you found yourself, sometimes, in a meeting, even one where no minutes were kept and someone else was waiting in the tent, or by the spring, swatting off rats, you didn't know, you only knew that you were in there, in the dining hall, and

outside, who knew what could go on. Who knew where you would wind up if you didn't stay inside the meeting?

So we said he should go to Tel Aviv and sell his rabbit ears there. So what? Is that so wrong? We weren't, God forbid, saying he had no future in Israel or, perish the thought, that he should go back there. To the Nazis. What did we know about the Nazis in '38? Those of us who had escaped personally might have seen a rabbi or two down on their knees scrubbing the pavement for the amusement of a gauleiter, or heard their windows smashed, downstairs, while they cowered over the shop, but this was simple stuff. Down there in Hebron they'd seen worse in '29. More than just a shop window was smashed. A skull maybe, a few children murdered. How were we to know that sitting in that dining hall with bullets whizzing through every once in a while from an irate Arab, we were the lucky ones? We were not telling Anschel he was not lucky. We didn't know at all that we were lucky. We felt like this was hell, but we were saved. We just didn't know yet saved from what.

But that was how Anschel said he felt. When he got on the cart to go to Tel Aviv. He said he heard his mother's voice at night, between the wet tents flapping, or worse, in the silence, saying things. And then he would hear us, too far away to make out, in the meeting, but talking, always talking.

I stood there, holding his bag as he loaded his tent onto the Arab's cart. He looked at me as he took the bag and I thought I saw something in his eye. One night in the tent he told me he thought he heard his mother ask how his father's grave was being kept up. (She was sound as a horse and strong as a steam engine, what I heard about his mother, and could have cleaned a graveyard and the street with the fur of her dresses, but Anschel was prone to care too much, which has never been a quality likely to keep you in this country.) The rabbits weren't the only things with long ears. That's how he heard what they said in the first place and knew there was a meeting. That's how he knew to lie there, in the dark, in the tent, on his own, and not come down to the dining

hall. That's how he knew what I was going to say, before I said it. They didn't — God forbid — say a word about Tel Aviv to his face. Who knew he was so sensitive? Who knew he listened to what was said after he moved from the long table to clear his plate?

He said if I was ever in Berlin I should call on him and on his mother. That was the first inkling I ever had that he was not going to set up on Dizengoff with his father's money and sell goyishe furs to Jews in the holy land. Who knows, maybe Jews in the city would have thought it was de rigeur to dress up for the Opera. They did have opera eventually, you do know that don't you? We didn't have it out here but people like you, civilized, did come eventually. I'm sure you know what's out there, in Tel Aviv.

To this day I don't know what I saw in his eye, if it was just a tear, or a fly from the Arab driver's donkey. He brushed it away, anyhow, and waved at the flies over the donkey's back, as if they had someplace else to be. And he took the bag and he got onto Mahmoud's wagon and he didn't wave. There was nobody else there to wave to. I was the only one.

He was the first person I'd ever met personally who I knew was going to leave Israel. I didn't know it was possible. I knew there was something out there, but I didn't know exactly what. I knew I was afraid. I knew I had escaped it and I didn't think there was whipped cream on it now, if you understand my meaning, though I didn't know exactly what the whipped cream would have covered if there was anybody out there, in the sky or under it, to put the whipped cream on. Anschel found out. I was too scared to leave. That's why I'm here now.

I haven't listened to a word that wasn't said right in my face by at least three members and preferably at least a secretary of the kibbutz himself now for over fifty years, since Anschel left. You could say that I handed him his bag and developed auditory amnesia. Except I hear the crickets singing and the wind upset the date palms. I don't have a problem hearing the rain fall. It's

just that there isn't rain. So I'm still sitting here and looking at these trees. And I still listen to them. Not anyone else. We are not licking honey here. We're bees, and pulling honey from the flowers we tend to try and sting. I don't say it isn't natural, and I don't say I was entirely wrong — I did my best — I just say if I listened to what everyone thinks, even myself, let alone what everybody says, I would have jumped in the spring and joined the rats before my Gadi was born. I would have jumped in the rat infested water. I wasn't brave enough to go after Anschel. He was the one who could pray, I just say words.

I got a hat, you know, from Anschel. Over there in the closet outside the dining room you'll find them. We all got hats. It was his will. Left with some goy lawyer in Germany. Before he died Anschel believed the businesses would return to Jews eventually, after the Nazis were killed, and of course they did, though the Nazis lived, forever in some cases. Even after the State was built we couldn't catch the Nazis, just like we couldn't keep all the Jews from leaving. It's a question of priorities — what do you build, what do you kill? After a hundred years, minus some change, it all came back to Jews, if someone sued. So the kibbutz sued. As beneficiaries of Anschel's will. We sued for fifty million Deutschmarks. That's what the business was valued at, in today's money. Not much, but we didn't pay a lawyer's fee. The Jewish Agency did. And we got it. Not the money of course. The German owner went bankrupt. But we got the fur hats. Silver fur in fact. Like this one here in the drawer. Handsome isn't it? Not that you get, as I say, many opportunities in Emek Bet Shean to wear fifteen hundred silver rabbit fur bonnets. But it's a curious thing. The babies love to touch the fur. There's nothing more accepting than a small baby. My great grandchildren love this silver rabbit fur, even if it died in Germany and Anschel had to flake in a chimney for fifty years before the fur tickled a baby's foot on Jewish soil.

But I'll wear it on the train tomorrow, to Jerusalem. More than a handful of snow there. Maybe a snow ball fight even, with my great grandchildren. Anschel isn't there to throw snowballs, but then he wouldn't have probably. I never saw him hurt a thing, even that fly he swatted away from the Arab driver's donkey got off scot free. Anschel was too slow to hurt the wind.

I couldn't wear this hat to tell you the truth, for thinking of him, but they all hang on it and say, "Come on Grandpa, pull the rabbit ears! Tell us about the man who made the ears!" And what do I say? I say he loved the kibbutz and hoped that they would live here. He hoped there would be some place here to live. And then I keep silent. Even to my grandchildren I keep silent because what is there to say. I tell them about the rain that used to fall, when Anschel was here, and how there was a garden of Eden here, once.

I hope Anschel sees us going down Dizengoff, from somewhere up there. I hope he sees us and that there's somewhere to see something other than rabbis on their knees scrubbing the pavement outside his father's factory. I never heard stories of what happened to him, thankfully. I just have my imagination to worry about and unlike Anschel I am able to stop it for hours at a time. So I just hear rain when it falls, which around here is in the middle of the night, if that. I listen then for Anschel's voice and hope it's saying, "Live." That's what I'd tell my grandchildren, if they would listen. But they are my grandchildren, the children of the children that we had after Anschel left, so they can only hear the leaves stirring and the water drip out of the spring that we killed all the rats in. They wear the silver fur hats and they laugh. They laugh at the stories we tell them about before. So I just talk about the rain and hope that they remember, before we take the train down to Jerusalem and walk down the street they built over the dirty sand.

Possession

Here everyone's the same, and — certain families apart — if you want your house to look a certain way, you ask at the committee meeting for houses, and they will tell you what you can have. Of course, if you're not Yoav Frankel's grandson, or Feivel's or Shrulik's, if you're not related to one of the big families, it's probably a waste of time going. Just wait and you'll find out what by the Grace of God you're getting. And if you haven't a tie to those names — not married, not one of them, nothing — you do what you can sometimes but mostly you sit still.

Sarah was not made to be free. She never liked it here, from the first week. I told her the tents were temporary, she wanted to know why they leaked. When it rained. I said, "Thank God it's raining."

She said, "If it's donations paid for these tents and we are volunteers to build the land, why do these tents have leaks? Who sold torn tents in exchange for donations?" She ran her hand over the tent flap like it was something she wouldn't buy used in a camping goods store. She always had a nimble hand with a needle, considering she never sewed a thing in her life before she came. All store bought. That's what she's like. Berlin she came from. Expects her money's worth. She may have been to Buchenwald but she never learned life is not what you signed for in the catalogue. She always thought you could require things of the management. I said, "At least there's a tent."

She said, "They said we'd get houses."

"But we have a tent," I said.

"It leaks."

The children's house was the first house, naturally. With a roof, and walls, to keep out rain. And Arabs, of course, that's why we had the house — in the first place — a place you could defend. We only thought we needed it after the second child, third, fourth — suddenly we had a little choir of cats howling and the meeting suggested we get a house. A children's house.

We had the first child, as you know, my Gadi, born the year Sarah and I got spliced. Right after Anschel left, for Tel Aviv and onward, we stopped sharing a tent, because he'd gone, and Sarah and I finally got married. She said she wanted a house. Always wanted a house to go to for her wedding night. Then the night of the big meeting to discuss Anschel, I didn't see her there, or find her in her tent. Couldn't find him. Didn't know if they were by the spring, batting off rats, finding their feet in the darkness, or just watching the stars on the hills. The next day Anschel left and she agreed to share a tent with me. We got married. And Gadi was conceived right by that spring. She told me it was right by that spring, when he arrived barely eight months later. Though he was not a little thing. But she protected him. Protected him like she knew what people could do and she was not prepared to lose him.

That's how the first child was left in a tent, at night, with its Mummy and Daddy. Me. And Sarah had no problems at first, was the heroine, first child on the land and all of that. I got my back slapped too, though I wasn't so happy about it. Then a second child, a third, a fourth — and they started to talk about a house. Where the children could be safe. Sarah wouldn't hear of it.

It's not that she didn't want a house. Like I told you, she wanted her first night to be in one, not by the spring, that's what she dreamed of. And I'm sure your wife dreams of something in Jerusalem, to have her baby in. The bottom drawer full of linen, everything you think of when you're living with Daddy.

"It wasn't so bad by the spring," I said, "You said you loved the spot. Flowery."

"I loved that you could sit there with someone and not hear what was said in the meeting. About houses, or where anyone should live."

"Who did you sit with there but me?"

"I'll sit there with Gadi, if I have to, but he will sleep only with me."

That was the size of it. The four children, of course, needed guarding. And the other parents of course, wanted privacy. That's what it was about. You can't have two bedrooms in a bit of leaky canvas sheeting. Who's going to have any more children if the babies are crying and wanting Mummy? Sarah never cared so much about that. If I wanted to go to the spring she'd go, with Gadi asleep in his blankets, and put him in the rushes. She lay down without a word, like she knew her way in the dark, but she never asked to go. She wouldn't hear of Gadi sleeping anywhere out of ear-shot.

"Didn't Anschel teach you anything?" she said. "Didn't you hear him?"

"Anschel talked about a lot of things," I said.

"Didn't you learn what happens here when people aren't under your hands?" she said. "Didn't you learn how people can make you disappear and give up what you wanted in all your dreams?"

"I learned not to listen too hard, from Anschel," I said.

"I learned to see my way through the trees," she said, "and I still see to find my own way. Nobody's guarding my son while I sleep and can't hear him want something. Nobody."

I went to the meeting. They voted for a children's house. Real wood. Enough room for the children and a guard. I didn't voice any specific objection. I asked if it was clear who would safeguard all of the little mites.

"You can take turns," the Secretary said, "I'm sure Sarah would love to spend the night, watching the house."

"What then?" I asked, "She'll sit one night. How will you promise her next night that her Gadi will be safe?"

One of the other girls spoke up. Magda. A little purple face. She never took the color here. Always looked like she just walked out of a frozen camp bunk bed.

"Gadi will be guarded like the rest of ours. We'll have a guard. A nurse. Whatever it takes."

"I didn't know you were a nurse…"

"I didn't know you needed someone else to sew your cuts and scrapes."

"We will provide for the children," the Secretary said, "The kibbutz will provide. Now can we vote?"

One never can persuade a majority of anything but what it wants. One is always listening to what other people think. One is not capable of making any kibbutz turn, unless one is one of those families, and even then, even then when we were in our tents and Gadi was still on Sarah's breast, and only four other children, even then I knew nobody was listening. It's just that those others, with their children, manufactured the votes for future meetings. Sarah was never interested in influencing the meeting. She went out and lay down in the dark, if I asked, otherwise Gadi went where she did. And when I came back to the tent to tell her what was said, she lay still and looked through the hole in the canvassing. Then she covered Gadi up (he had thrown off his blanket), and she said, "They don't need a guard. I will sit with Gadi every night in the children's house, every night, if they insist we can't keep him ourselves."

"It's not about keeping him," I said, "Anyway, what about going to the spring? Or staying in?"

"If we can't take Gadi we can't go to the spring," she said firmly. "I won't go there with a man again."

"I'm not a man, I'm — "

"Gadi loves me, I won't go there without someone who loves me."

"What about me?"

"You love living here. Some people I've known love me, more than living here."

"Anybody who cares for you when it's hot and there's no more iced lemon?"

She looked at me.

"I would leave here like that, if it wasn't for you and Gadi."

"Why didn't you leave with Anschel?"

"He never asked. He thought I'd never marry a furrier from Berlin."

"Instead you married a laborer?"

"I married who loved me and was staying."

"Didn't you love me?"

"Gadi was born here. I won't let anybody make me lose him. I'll kill anyone that comes in that house with my bare hands if I have to. And if you want to do what the kibbutz wants, that's where you'll go to find your wife."

It wasn't hard. For me at least. Sarah sat, another woman sat. Sometimes it was Magda, sometimes the Secretary himself. Sat in a corner with a kerosene lamp and a newspaper and gun. And Sarah sat in a chair by Gadi's crib. They each had their crib brought from the tents.

We went to the spring once or twice. I came and I coughed and said Gadi was sick. And we took the little blighter out with us wrapped in his things. We came back and said he was sleeping, better now and could go back in there for the sake of kibbutz unity. The Secretary would just smile at me, I swear he had horns by the light of that kerosene lamp. Magda never looked up from her knitting. She and Sarah never spoke a word, just sitting there. Sitting and staring — Sarah into the dark around Gadi's crib, Magda looking at Sarah and knitting.

Eventually we got a house. Just a shack. Then the other children came. Never from by the spring. Except that time, like

Sarah said. Gadi was a given. But none of the others stayed. Sarah was willing to let them sleep with the children. She only sat up nights by Gadi's bed. And Gadi still lives here, that's why you see his children on Sabbaths with their grandma and grandad. He's always sat next to me, in synagogue, right where Anschel sat. And the other children left when they grew up and I see them, I love them, but the kibbutz is not their blood.

I wonder sometimes, sitting by the spring, late at night, alone now since Sarah has gone — I have to find my way in the dark with a torch, because no one ever taught me what she learned. I wonder what the meaning was of all those people I loved here who left it. Me. Why was it my lot to love this land and the rain drops that fall here but lose every one I cared for who came here. Except Gadi, and his children. I still see them, Sabbath morning. They ask me to come join them, for the big meal. I feel sometimes he's Sarah's son, watching, as I sit with the other old children in the big house we finally built for our worship. I think Sarah told him to watch me. She left, when the kibbutz wouldn't pay for her hand.

You didn't know? Yes, you're not wrong to be going to Jerusalem. Don't think you're wrong to be going. Don't think it's not the right thing. An operation. Something that Buchenwald left with her. She was beaten, you see, and the body will tell. It will tell what it's seen and heard, eventually. When she turned sixty-seven she needed the procedure or her arm wouldn't continue working. A procedure which could only be done out of the country, or in Afula. They said somebody knew how to do it in Afula, but even there is would cost money. The committee said, "Possibly."

We got a second opinion. The second opinion said a procedure would work, but required going to Switzerland. The kibbutz preferred the first opinion.

So we went to the hospital near Bet Shean — Afula — and had her wishbones amputated. But it never worked, she sat and sat, and recuperated, but the arm never regained its strength.

Not enough money. In Switzerland maybe she'd have kept her hands working.

Gadi visited, brought flowers, books. He even adjusted the hand press so she could do her work — binding books to keep them in use — with the other hand. But she can't use that hand. Says it's too cold. And she sat and sat in the house and after seven months without work she couldn't get out of bed. It wasn't so long after that.

I went to the committee. I asked. Gadi asked. Sarah never went. She refused to discuss it, Buchenwald, in public. Only once with Gadi, he took her on a trip to see the camp, some anniversary, to see where, to hear how. They took the train across Poland. For old times sake.

The plane from Tel Aviv to Warsaw, then the train to Buchenwald.

She said, "The same railway lines, same street signs. Judenstrasse, Jew Court." There was no one there left to play tennis with, like I do after Sabbath on kibbutz.

They got off the train. Nice town, now, Buchenwald. Quite apart from the tourist industry. I think they have a sports coat factory. Then they went in the gates. She took him, my Gadi, first child born in this land, behind this fence, before we even had a fence, took him to see why her arm hurt. And there was nothing. Empty barracks. Not mice even. Rusty wire. And the stench, the stench of something you cannot get out of your skin with sandpaper. She stood on the concentration camp bunk house floor and clopped her foot softly on the rotten boards. "We won," she said to him, and she looked around as if waking from a dream and rubbed her arm and said, "Let's go now."

They flew from Warsaw. Hardly gone forty eight hours. You would have thought she had stepped off kibbutz for a dental appointment. But the kibbutz wouldn't pay for her to go for the operation.

Magda had her teeth done in Tel Aviv. The old Secretary, Shrulik, went to Switzerland for his steel hip. But he has family.

Gadi and I said she was weak. She needed the operation abroad to work again. The kibbutz Secretary, as it happens also chair of this committee, as it happens also Shrulik's grandson, said, "It's time she rests. You should tell her the kibbutz expects her to enjoy what she's built. She doesn't owe us anything."

"What do you owe?" I said.

Gadi patted my trouser leg and whispered to me not to make a scene. Sometimes I think there's some of me in him, sometimes I think Sarah just told him to play the game. I didn't know what else to say, in any case. What I have said, when I was pressed to say something, I said when others asked me to, for the kibbutz, for somebody else. What could I say now — to the kibbutz? What could I say when there was no one left to ask? That the kibbutz lied to me? That they said there would be houses and there were tents, that only if you're family are you equal, that no one knows the name of anyone who walks outside the fence, only who's with you in the meeting hall and votes, whoever does what the kibbutz wants, that's who you see, the rest just melt away — into the palms and the night and the crickets screaming their lungs out and only doing what — sawing the silence? How would I say all that? And who would listen?

I took her once, down to the spring, the last time. It was late in the day, she could no longer see her way through the darkness. We picked our way, old, slow, with walking sticks, to the spot where Gadi would lie in the roots of a tree, the spot where earlier, she told me he was conceived, and I believed it.

We looked at it. The old grey banks now overflowing with ivy. The icy depths now greened over with pink and yellow lilies. The young ones still come, and lie there with their blankets. We never needed blankets.

"Gadi will die here," she said, "I suppose you've won."

"What have I won?" I said.

"Possession," she said. "Isn't that what they told us in England, before the English even left this country? Possession is nine tenths of the law."

"I don't possess anything," I said, "The kibbutz owns our housing."

"You possess this," she said and she raised her foot over the ivy. "Your son will be buried here."

"My son?" I said.

"Possession is everything," she said. "I haven't had anything I wanted I could keep since Berlin," she said, "except Gadi. And you are keeping him."

She died that week.

It's a funny thing the spring at night. You hear things. Feel things. Sometimes you see things. A boy and girl. I could have sworn it was Sarah at nineteen. Baggy clothes, everything. Of course fashion is always repeating. But the boy looked so like him. Like Anschel. My Gadi. Perhaps it was my grandson. Or maybe just an old man's tricks in the darkness. Or maybe the dark tells me what I never did see. And I listen, now, perhaps it's too late, but I listen. Anschel, Sarah, Gadi. Only Gadi still speaking, but I listen mostly to the darkness and it tells me, "You have not won. There is no end to this beating, and when the water dries your son's grave will blow away." I get up. I brush the mud off my trousers. And I try the slope once again, without Sarah in the darkness.

About Atar Hadari

Atar Hadari was born in Israel, raised in England and studied writing in the US. His fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart prize by *New York Stories, Margin, Witness* and *Larcom Review,* and his story "Deacon" merited honorable mention in the 2001 Pushcart anthology. He won the Liverpool Literature Festival's "Pulp Idol" competition by reading two minutes from *When We Were Saved*. His debut poetry collection Rembrandt's Bible will be published by Indigo Dreams Publishing in July 2013.

"Our Place" stands alone as a novella within Hadari's novel in progress, *When We Were Saved*. The title story "Our Place" was previously published as part of Hadari's one-man show "Three Sides of a Fence," in *Jewish Quarterly*.

Some of Hadari's stories have been performed and may be listened to online, notably "The Donkey" and "The Princess," which are also part of *When We Were Saved*.