



## RIGHT OF RETURN

To sleep in your own bed again, to be back in the pleasant old neighborhood – what a torment

“Not everything will be ready,” the contractor said, “but you can definitely move back home.”

“Home,” I thought to myself the night before the move. What is home, exactly? Does the term have a meaning beyond the physical one? And if not, why do I miss home? Three weeks had passed since the renovation started, and so overwhelming was the sense of excitement at going back that I barely got any sleep on the last night in our temporary residence.

“You go to work, and I’ll take the kids to school,” I told my wife on the morning of the longed-for return. “By the end of the day we will be back in our home, our sweet home. I’m in charge of the move, all right?”

Two Arab workers from a company that specializes in cleaning renovated houses toiled in the rooms. I felt uncomfortable at having Arabs cleaning my place, but I just nodded and told the contractor who is supervising the renovation that everything was packed and in the car, and that as soon as he gives the go-ahead I will start taking in the suitcases and bags.

Besides the cleaners, the installer of the banister was also supposed to come. “Two hours of work,” the contractor said. “He won’t interfere with the cleaners, and the cleaners won’t interfere with him.”

The banister guy arrived exactly on time, with an earring in his ear and a genetically engineered cleft in his bottom. “Sayed,” the contractor said as he introduced me. The man nodded and smiled. “Great, Sayed, there might be sparks. I want you to follow me with a brush and fix up after me.”

“No,” the contractor said, embarrassed. “He’s the owner.” “Ah,” the installer said, and got to work.

“You know,” my wife said to me on that sleepless night before the move back, “the house really is charming now. It looks prestigious and comfortable, but still...” She stopped.

“Still what?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, as she always does when she knows. “I’m just thinking about the children again, about what this is doing to them, how they feel, how it will affect their behavior and the way they get along.”

“Again the thing with the Jewish neighborhood?” “I’m not saying,” she said, “it’s a lovely apartment, very nice neighbors, but you know.”

“No,” I replied with the jangled nerves of someone who had planned to spend NIS 20,000 to add a room with a plaster wall and found himself paying, as of that moment, more than NIS 180,000. “I absolutely, absolutely do not know!”

“I’m just asking myself,” she said, striking a dramatic pose so the words would sink in, “if this is our natural place, and even more for the children.”

“Natural,” I asserted, “one hundred percent natural.”

“Excuse me,” the banister installer said, smiling, “I just never imagined that you live here, yes, Sa’id?”

“Sure,” I said, “sure, forget it.” And I really meant that, because it didn’t hurt

plenty more we had planned to donate, if you want to have a look.”

“Your Arabic is excellent,” the worker said, still speaking in Hebrew.

“I am an Arab,” I declared. The worker did a double take and asked, “And this is your place?”

“Yes,” I told him.

“We bought it a few years ago. Yes, this is my home.” Again that word, “home,” and the meaning it holds for me.

“Walla,” he said, still amazed, “I never imagined. But *shukran*, thank you.”

“For what?” I didn’t understand what he was thanking me for and thought for a moment he was teasing me.

“The shoes,” he said, holding them up with one hand to show me.

“You’re welcome.” My face burned with shame.

“But what can I do?” I asked my wife late that night, after the children were asleep in our home and a long hot shower hadn’t done much for the back pains, which became more excruciating with every suitcase I lugged and every cardboard box I moved from one room to another.

“What can I do?” I said, leaning back a little in my bed, which I hadn’t seen for such a long time. “And what exactly is our natural place? What?”

“I don’t say it’s easy,” she said, invoking her social-work phrases again. “It can be very hard.”

“So I have to live in a village to feel I am in a natural place?” I asked. “I’m not allowed city life?” “That’s not what I’m saying,” she replied, with a patience I was quickly losing.

“Then what are you saying?” I insisted. “I really want to understand. What are my options for being natural? To buy some house that is unregistered and unrecorded in the eastern city? To buy a place in the area that was conquered in 1967? To forgo my values for a crappy apartment in an Arab neighborhood in Jerusalem? What? What is natural? To go back to the village? Back to Tira? To the family? To fights between siblings over every meter of land? What is natural? What can I do in order to safeguard the children? Tell me, please, what is right and what is wrong, and I will do it!”

“I say you should go to sleep now,” she said, rubbing cream into her hands and yawning. “You look too tired.”

“Yes. Good night,” I said, knowing I would not sleep soundly or wake up naturally.



me in the least that he thought I was an Arab worker. At least, it didn’t hurt me as much as the fact that two Arab workers were doing their thing in the apartment and I tried to avoid contact with them until one of them came over and spoke to me in Hebrew. “These shoes were thrown out,” the worker, who I estimated was my father’s age, said. “They were in the garbage. Can I have them for the kids?”

I choked up for an instant, not sure whether to smile, reply in Hebrew and play the generous Jewish homeowner who takes pity on the wretches, or to answer in Arabic and come across as a maniac Arab who lives among Jews and throws out almost-new Nikes that were bought from the U.S. in the wrong size for the kids.

I found myself saying “*T’fadl*” – please, go ahead – and continuing in Arabic, “Of course you can take them. And there are

Illustrations by Amos Biderman



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