

Yitzhak Ben-Ner

Rustic Sunset & Other Stories

Yitzhak Ben-Ner

translated by Robert Whitehill



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Rustic Sunset

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Introduction

Robert Whitehill

Itzhak Ben-Ner's stories are compelling and haunting. The situations and characters are unforgettable, often bizarre, always real, with sensuous portrayals of sexuality and honest presentations of love, of dying, of day-to-day living. On awarding Ben-Ner the Ramat-Gan Prize for Literature in 1977 for *Rustic Sunset*, the judges justly declared: "Ben-Ner comes to terms with harsh and painful contemporary material, achieving an artistic expression that only few young writers attain."

Setting is the core strength of Ben-Ner's stories. His characters are convincing, tragicomic figures. His plots, ostensibly a series of independent incidents, are unified and strong, yet artistically subtle. The movement is fast; the dialogue, controversial and reflective of various social and ethnic groups. Still, setting is the supreme factor, whether it be now or thirty years ago, whether a miserable village, a sweaty print shop, an Indiana granary, a plush Tel Aviv apartment, a Manhattan bar, or a Sinai battlefield.

"Winter Games" is a haunting tale of how a decaying village during the British Mandate was affected by the gathering storm that would, in a few years, erupt into full-scale war. The story emphasizes people's everyday lives.

In the swiftly changing dramatic scenes of "Cinema," a boy's uncle runs a small print shop in Tel Aviv during the 1940s. The uncle is obsessed with the cinema, yet shuns any drama in his own life; his interest in film prevents his ever developing his printing business, and he lacks the courage or drive to try to make his own movies. He avoids the affections of a young woman and is held in contempt by his workers. Abandoned many years before by his wife, who ran away to England with a British soldier, he constantly predicts that she will someday return to him. When she does appear, the uncle, instead of greeting her as she waits in his apartment, slips into a movie house and stays there until he thinks it safe to come out. The story is also about the boy, his own infatuation with motion pictures, and his experiences of growing up. Like the other tales in this collection, this one is full of atmosphere, candid observations and conversations, humor, and dramatic tension.

"Rustic Sunset" is an almost macabre tale of introspection. The narrator, now in his late forties, looks back at his youth with longing tinged with sorrow and observes the present with apocalyptic premonitions. Once virile and carefree, he is now obsessed with death—with the impending death of his wife, with the daily deaths of the old and young, with the death of his own self-respect. This story is outstanding in its realism, its vivid descriptions of lust and pathos and village life.

"Kokomo," set in and around Kokomo and Indianapolis, Indiana, is narrated by a local blue-collar worker who with his wife Ruth is a self-proclaimed convert to Judaism. His new name is Boaz Ben-B'rith. The story, openly melodramatic, pokes fun at some commonly held misconceptions. It reproduces life among middle-class Americans without reverting to stereotypes, and although some of the incidents are exaggerated (they seem at times to be a contemporary version of Candide), they are believable. The characters are many—blacks and whites, Jews and gentiles, visiting Israelis and expatriates, one of whom is a young man named Yonatan Perach, who has many ambivalent feelings toward his country. Perach reappears as a secondary character in the next story, "Dime Novel."

The fifty-three-year-old protagonist of "Dime Novel" is unsure of his present and frightened of his future. As a liberal Israeli attorney who has defended the interests of radical students and Arab villagers, he can win the trust of neither his clients nor his colleagues. As a prominent political analyst, he feels empty. As a husband, he cannot come to terms with his wife, a promising young poet. As a lover, he struggles to but cannot win back his former wife. The story bristles with the tensions and trepidations of a man who, in midlife, stands unsure of his accomplishments and afraid that he has not truly lived.

Alienation is also felt in "Eighteen Months." Here, a father struggles with the reality of his son's death in the 1973 War. In this touching but not

sentimental tale, the protagonist makes some shockingly candid observations about himself and his attempt to run away from the truth of his son's demise, about his trying to live the life that he wanted his son to have, about his relationship with his wife, and about political movements.

"Nicole," the only story in the collection written in the third person, portrays personal relationships between men and women in the army, and the ways personal emotions can interfere with professional responsibility. Nicole is a sophisticated and educated young woman from Haifa who has become involved with a high-ranking officer twenty years her senior. In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, her lover finds himself being vaguely accused of misjudgments resulting in the deaths of many soldiers. The cause of the accusation is in fact not his negligence but the jealousy of another officer, one of Nicole's casual relationships. This story, with its sensitive and inquisitive technique, gets beneath the surface of the characters and reveals emotions and fears that many men, especially Israeli men, are wont to conceal.

The final story in the collection, "A Tale of Two Brothers," is a short adventure that carries us to Russia, to the U.S. Midwest, and to Israel, as the narrator retraces his family history through tales told by his father.

The stories of Yitzhak Ben-Ner are among the most original pieces of fiction produced during the last several decades. Ben-Ner's style is elastic. His original situations reveal both experience in life and insight into the human psyche. They also show the influence of the Hebrew Scriptures, Faulkner, Joyce, Peretz, Berdichevsky, Megged, and Garcia-Marquez. These tales are bound to produce in translation the electrifying effect they have had in Israel, for they are eloquent contributions to world literature.



Winter Games

hat winter, in January, my brother had a bitter quarrel with Father, but I can't remember what it was about. In our village everyone quarrelled with everyone about everything. My brother shouted, and Father answered him quietly, and I ran away from the shouting and went outside to the barn, without even taking my coat.

It was a black morning. The cows in the yard stood motionless in the dung and gazed with moist eyes at the green clover fields, steam rising from their nostrils and from the ground. Due to the rain leaking through the cracks in the tin walls, many bales of fodder had grown moldy and rotten and a sweet-pungent aroma blended with the heat of aging trapped in the old barn.

I placed a dry, empty bag over my head and shoulders, like the poor man's sackcloth my father used to make for himself on rainy days, and climbed the mountains of stacked hay to the top of the pile, next to the wall. From the opening torn in the tin by the rain, I could see the sloping fields and the grooved dirt roads that carried stagnant water to the valley; they were like dull lead strips, cold and gloom in their luster. Everything stopped and stood still on that winter morning beneath the black skies.

At the far edge of the road walked a man, hardly moving; he walked amid water and dirt and was not arriving. For a long time I waited for him to come from the foothills, from the western horizon of the proud valley villages, up to the entrance to the yard. He was short and wore short pants and a standard khaki shirt. He seemed to be coming out of the summer. His shoes were full of heavy mud from the road. When he stopped, he looked up toward me and I recognized him immediately: The year before, he and his buddy had been hired hands in our village. The village boys had called him "Yemeni" derisively. He and his buddy would work sometimes for one person, sometimes for an-

other, and they made enough to live on. They both had lived in old Ben-Melilla's shack for a pound and a half a month. In one room the old man slept, and in the other, beyond the tar-paper and plywood partition, lived the two workers. In winter the workdays dwindled (more and more men from this accursed village left their agricultural work for day work in Haifa and its suburbs), and the two spent a lot of time in their room. When the local guys got together on Friday night by the little bridge next to the abandoned factory, they would speak of them with scorn, and rumors circulated. Stories were told about everyone in the village. The few girls used to giggle when they got together. Strangers charmed them with their strangeness; everything strange was a precious novelty in our village, whose twenty years of life had been twenty years of old age.

But one night, Hadari returned from work at the movie house in the city and did not find his daughter at home. (Adina was her name and I shall have more to say of her.) People were roused to look for her. She was fifteen then. It was a rainy night, and, according to what was said, she was found in her underwear in the shack of the two workers. Half the boys in the village, the Sephardim, demanded their blood, my brother said. Father, who for a short period was head of the council—he later resigned, since he was too much of a compromiser to be successful—smuggled the two men out of the village at dawn, battered and bruised.

But now the Yemeni was lifting his face toward me, and there was no sign of blood or fear. "How's it goin'?" he cried. His voice was alive and rolling and guttural. "Remember me?"

I nodded my head from the top of my hay tower, and he asked in a loud voice: "Say, is there any work in the village or somethin'?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Then I asked: "Are you stupid or what? The Babiov boys and Adina's dad will break your head if they see you!"

He laughed, as if he had asked only in jest. His moustache was now thicker. He wiped his wet face with his crumpled black beret. "Come 'ere." He talked as they did in the city. "Come 'ere. Tell me a minute. Dan Starkman—is his house right or left of yours?"

The morning before, Dan Starkman had led Chaya his mule from the barn next to the hay shed and taken her out to be killed. From the top of my fodder tower I could see them moving. Apparently he intended to shoot her down the road by the gully separating our sparse clover fields from the beautiful vetch fields of the neighboring village. But the road was very muddy, and the old mule was feeble. Her twisted legs slid and sank in the buttery clay, and she had neither the strength nor the intelligence to draw them out. Dan Starkman kicked her with his boots and cursed her, to no avail. His late father had acquired her from an Arab in a village near Acre in the early days. Dan Starkman had been a child then. Now he was a young man of twenty-nine, still single, and she was a very old and skinny animal, with a fog of obtuseness over her eyes and legs that tottered as she slowly walked along, as if her joints and sockets were no longer connected. She nodded her head up and down, as if she were consenting to her fate.

Starkman was glowering. His friends were either in the Palmach defense units or had left this aging village, never to return. He had borne the burden of the land ever since the death of his father, and he buried all his furor in his work. Sometimes I awoke early on summer mornings, sneaked past the manure piles, and saw him beating his cows with a pitchfork handle and cursing them during the morning milking. Once, when milking was over, he angrily poured all the milk in his bucket over them. He did not speak much with anyone, and was gloomier than them all. On rare occasions he suddenly changed his clothes, went out to the highway, and disappeared for a day or two. His aged mother would do the chores then, cursing and swearing. The village boys said in ridicule that he was in heat and had gone out to the whores in Haifa.

Now he stood with his hands on his hips, staring at the thin beast that had accompanied him through most of his life. I saw him nod his head, glance down the water-grooved road and look up at the sky. Then he turned and walked to his house, but not before he turned his head to her as if to say: You stay here! He returned from his house with his pistol—a long-barreled Mauser that his father had smuggled in from the port of Naples when he first came to this land. As he walked, he loaded it with bullets and released the bolt. Chaya his mule saw him coming and the fog seemed to lift from her eyes. The cows in the yard bunched together by the fence to see what was happening.

I slid down on my backside from the mountain of dry grass and ran as fast as I could through the mud to the edge of the road where these things were taking place.

"You're shooting her?" I asked, out of breath.

He shrugged and then nodded.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why—because this old whore's rotting from syphilis or the devil knows what. She can hardly stand on her dead legs," he said, as if to himself, as if justifying what he was about to do.

Chaya the mule looked at him, and her head stopped moving up and down. He stretched out his arm and shot bullet after bullet into her head and belly, until he had emptied the whole barrel. His face was contorted from the effort. I saw, about a step in front of me, her flesh riddled with holes on the side of her neck, by her ear, and in her belly. She exhaled again from her thin abdomen, where the hair had fallen off, leaving bald spots. With each breath the last showers of blood and life spewed forth. Then she grew quiet. Her bones still lie there today.

The pungent smell of sulphur was in the air, and for a moment I was stunned from the power of what had happened. When I came to, I grabbed a clod of soil—I was eleven then—molded it together in my hands and slammed it into Dan Starkman's back with all my strength. He absorbed the blow, grabbed his ribs, and turned to me in scowling astonishment, his eyes squinting with contempt.

"You're one lousy prick!" I shouted at him, retreating backwards in the mud. "What did you shoot her for? What do you think—she's some old mule and you can kill her? I wish *you* were sunk up to your ass in mud and they were shooting you! I wish!"

He sprang at me, grabbed me, and lifted me in rage. His facial muscles quivered in front of my face, and the stubble of his beard scratched my cheeks. "Listen here . . . Listen here . . . You shit, listen here . . ." I had never heard him stammer so emotionally. Finding no more words to say, he tossed me into the mud. He stared at me as if he intended to trample me and then turned and walked away.

I had trouble getting up. My sweatsuit was soiled and my hair was sticky with mud. At home, my father nodded his head, left the dishes in the sink, dried his hands, and changed my clothes without saying a word. He just nodded his head, amused and a little sad, as I kept repeating in boiling anger: "You'll break his head, Papa. Right? You'll break that lousy murderer Starkman's head. Right, Papa? Right?" But I knew that my father, unlike the fathers of the Sephardic boys, would do nothing of the sort. At most he would reprove him with a few stern words, no more.

Wearing another sweatsuit, my father's other pair of boots, and a wool hat, I went back out to look death in the face: vitreous eyes, with a light discharge oozing from them as if they were still alive; a big winter fly, green and fat, soared away and returned to the parched lips; and another fly, perhaps the first one's mate, circled the base of the tail; the old leg muscles bulged like etchings in the smooth skin; and soft dewdrops clung to the ends of the sparse, protruding hair.

The next day death was more real. In the morning the dew on the hair bristles had turned to frost and the blood had become red crystalline splinters. Sitting at the top of my tower, I saw two black vultures circle slowly above the mud-caked body, examining the possibilities through cold eyes and then dropping upon the dead, swollen abdomen. I banged the tin wall with the back of my hand and cried out until my brother's shouting was interrupted. He and my father came out to see why I was shouting. The vultures spread their wings tranquilly and rose up. They would return.

But at this moment, the worker they called Yemeni was coming closer, walking but barely moving, as if carrying a greeting from the valley. Before evening, from the door of our house, I saw Dan Starkman, wearing clean khakis and with a stern face, going out on one of his trips to the city. The boys laughed and said that he was going to the whores in Haifa. But a month later he had not returned home, and his mother was collapsing from the burden of the farm.

The next day, after his quarrel with father, my brother had begun to work in Haifa. Most of the village men would leave for the city in the morning to seek their livelihood there, each man in his own way. For a long time, the village fields had not been supplying everyone's needs.

It didn't take my brother long to find a job. Because he was tall and muscular for his age—he was fourteen when he started shaving—and since he was diligent at every chore, Menashe Menashe used to nag him all the time: "Well, when are you going to work for me? When?" Menashe Menashe, whose house was three doors down from ours, had a small locksmith's shop in the lower city amid the Arab shops. Now, out of joy at my brother's coming to work for him, he dismissed his two Arab workers. One man's success is always another man's failure. One day the two of them, along with one of their friends, waited for my brother to come out of the shop at noon and beat him with canes—but that's another story.

Father did not prevent my brother from doing anything he wanted. My father always put our wishes before his own. For a number of days no words were exchanged between them. My brother would get up in the morning, obedient to himself and his duties, and put on his blue overalls. While he was washing, my father would return from milking and put some chicory coffee on the burner—the pleasant, distant murmurs of morning to which I awakened. I would pull my brother's blanket from his bed and curl up in two blankets, dozing beneath their warmth between sleep and wakefulness, in the milky fog of the winter morning flowing down from the mountains and seeping between the cracks of the house to fill up my room and my head. I heard my brother's noisy swallows and the rattle of the cup against the bottom of the sink—a sign of words still left unspoken—and Menashe Menashe was already honking the horn of his pickup truck outside.

After a week my brother's resentment cooled somewhat, for no apparent reason. It disappeared just as it had come—but he kept working in the city. My father and he were now exchanging some routine sentences in the morning and in the evening. My father, without saying anything, continued to bear the burden of the farm, which became increasingly heavy. He rose early in the morning, sometimes even at four, in order to chop weeds or clover for the cows, milk and feed them, clean the dung out of the barn, and feed the chickens. Then he hurried home to brew the morning coffee before my brother left for the city. He left the chicory coffee in order to harness and hitch the donkey to his little cart and make his rounds among the houses to sell milk. That was his morning routine. My father's barn was one of the last ones remaining in the village. The year before, cattle merchants had visited our village frequently, leaving with cows in their trucks. My father used to say that a village without cattle was a settlement whose last breath was gone from its lungs, doomed to choke to death.

One afternoon—my brother had been working an entire month at Menashe Menashe's locksmith's shop, and his body was bandaged from the blows sustained at the hands of the Arab workers—a loud boom sounded from the direction of Haifa. A large mushroom of smoke and dust rose from the bottom of Mount Carmel. Afterwards Hadari, who was an usher at a small cinema in the lower city, said that the boom had caused the windowpanes to shatter into smithereens. At that time we did not know what had happened, but it was already

something to talk about in the village and people gathered at the outskirts of the village by the bridge. Some said that the oil refineries had been burned down by the Arabs; others said that the Jewish underground had blown up the radar installations in the Stella Maris army camp.

The men who remained in the village stood there with the old, the sick (there were always lots of sick people), girls, and children. They voiced their assumptions out loud and gazed at the smoke, waiting for the Afula bus to bring back the men who worked in Haifa, so that they could hear what had really happened. Time passed, but the bus did not come. The people began to worry. More time passed, and the bus came; but only one figure got off on the main road, and no one else. My father's face drew tight, and the people stopped talking. The man stepping carefully up the mud road to the village was neither my brother nor anyone that had been expected. Curiosity turned to worry and then fear; one of the women started to cry, and the crowd moved spontaneously toward the approaching figure.

It was Dan Starkman. His scowling face showed surprise at the reception. My father grabbed him by the collar, as if threatening to wrench the truth out of him: "What happened? Where's my son?"

Starkman's face was pale from suppressed emotion, and his eyes stared blankly at the people gathering around him. My father shook him, but he said nothing.

Suddenly one of the women noticed blood oozing from his sleeve. She screamed in fright. The other women also began to scream and grabbed him, shaking him like a fruit tree as fear of the unknown grew stronger. Starkman kept quiet; his eyes seemed to turn in their sockets. His mother, wearing her stained housecoat and heavy boots, a rough scarf on her head, burst into the circle of threatening women, striking them, pushing her way through, and cursing. She grabbed her twentynine-year-old son away from the menacing crowd and dragged him away like a little boy. Blood oozed from the back of his shirt.

"What about the cows, Mama?" asked Dan Starkman. "What about the cows? Tell me." His face was very white.

"How come he's asking about the cows?" screamed one woman. "What about us, and our sons? Let him tell us, that louse!"

An echo of enraged agreement rose from the other woman, as if Dan Starkman were guilty of everything they feared deep inside. At that moment Ezra Pardo approached. He was the guard appointed by the British to sit in the village police office. His duties consisted of polishing the two heavy Canadian rifles, adjusting his moustache in front of the broken windowpane, and relaying a daily phone message to the station in Haifa. He was always the source of news concerning security in the village. "The terrorists," he said, "The son-of-a-bitch terrorists have blown up the British oil with dynamite."

The people turned around to look at him.

"Not the refineries," he explained. "It's the oil camp that's burning. The petroleum camp."

"It must be *Lehi*" said Yoskeh Pen, the village storekeeper—he was referring to the anti-British underground.

"They told me from headquarters," said Pardo, "just now. On the phone."

A woman went up to him. "Did they say anything about our boys?"

Pardo shrugged his shoulders: "They said there's a curfew throughout the city. At the Jeleme Checkpoint they're searching every car. They didn't say any more, and I didn't ask."

"Ask him." said Pen, pointing to Dan Starkman, who stood by his mother, his whole body shaking and not from the cold. "He must be a LEHI man!"

At this tempers began to rise. "Come here, Polack pig," shouted old Babiov, full of energy and hate—like his sons, who had not returned from the city. "What did you do there? Tell us right now!"

"Mama, what about the cows? What about the cows?" asked Starkman again, as if in supplication. His mother guarded him with her frail body. Her breathing was hoarse, and her eyes ran in every direction. "Whoever lays a hand on him—I'll tear their eyes out!" she hissed in Yiddish at those who advanced on her and her son.

"What's wrong with you people?" asked my father. "The boy is injured —don't you see?"

The people faltered, and their hate lost its strength.

The swell of smoke by the sea had not yet dissipated. The mother pulled her injured son behind her, and my father buttoned his shabby leather coat, checked his wallet, and told me: "I'm going to the city. You go home and wait for us." He had never given me orders before. "Feed the donkey and the cows, and put dry bags over the hole on top of the