

# I

This is how it was: Several years ago, on a hot summer day, I rose from a pleasant afternoon nap and made a cup of coffee for myself, and while I stood sipping from the mug I noticed that everyone was looking strangely at me and holding back their laughter. When I bent down to put my sandals on I discovered the reason: my toenails, all ten of them, had been painted with shiny red nail polish.

“What is this?” I cried. “Who painted my toenails?”

From the other side of the porch door, which stood ajar, came the sound of giggling that I recognized at once from previous incidents.

“I know who did this,” I said, raising my voice. “I’ll find you and I’ll catch you and I’ll paint your noses and your ears with the very same shiny red polish you used on my toes, and I’ll manage to do it all before my coffee turns cold!”

The giggles became laughter that confirmed my suspicions. While I lay sleeping, my brother’s two little daughters, Roni and Naomi, had stolen in and painted my toenails. Later they would tell me that the younger of the two had done four nails while her older sister had done the other six. They had hoped I would not notice and that I would walk out in public, only to be scorned and ridiculed. But now that their scheme had been unmasked they burst into the room and pleaded: “Don’t take it off, don’t, it’s really pretty.”

I told them that I, too, thought it was really pretty, but that there was a problem: I had been invited to “an important event” where I was expected to speak, but I could not appear before the

crowd with painted nails, since it was summer and in summer I wear sandals.

The girls said that they were familiar with both matters—the important event and my custom of wearing sandals—and that this was precisely the reason they had done what they did.

I told them that I would go to any other important event with shiny red toenails but not to this important event. And that was because of the crowd that would gather there, a crowd no sane man would appear before with painted toenails—and red ones, no less.

The event we were talking about was the inauguration of the old arms cache used by the Haganah, a Jewish paramilitary organization that operated in Palestine during the British Mandate. The cache had been built on a farm in the village of Nahalal and disguised to look like a cowshed cesspool. In my novel *The Blue Mountain* I had described an arms cache that never existed in a village that never existed in the Jezreel Valley, but my arms cache was also built and disguised exactly the same way. After the book was published, readers began to show up on the real farm in the real village, asking to see the real cache.

Rumor passed by word of mouth, the number of visitors grew and became a nuisance, and the owners of the property were smart enough to make the best of their situation. They renovated the cache, set up a small visitors' center, and thus added a new stream of income to their farm. That day, when my brother's two young daughters painted my toenails with red polish, was the day the renovated arms cache was being inaugurated, and I had been invited as one of the speakers at the ceremony.

"Now bring some nail polish remover and get this pretty stuff off me," I told Roni and Naomi. "And please hurry up because I have to get going already!"

The two refused. "Go like that!" they said.

I sat down and explained to them that this was a particularly manly event, that there would be generations of fighters from the Jezreel Valley in attendance, elders from the Haganah, the Israel Defense Forces, and the Palmach. Men of the sword and the plowshare, men who had bent spears into pruning shears and vice versa. In short, girls, these were people who would not react favorably to men with red polish on their toenails.

But Naomi and Roni paid no attention to my pleas. "What do you care?" they cried. "You said yourself it's pretty."

"If you don't take it off I'll wear shoes!" I threatened. "Nobody will see your red nail polish, and that'll be that!"

"You're afraid!" they exclaimed. "You're afraid what they'll say about you in the village."

Those words took effect at once. Without knowing it the two little girls had hit a soft underbelly. Anyone familiar with members of the old-time collective agricultural movement, anyone who has been upbraided by them, knows that in small villages eyes take everything in and comments are made with regularity and rumors take off and land like cranes in a sown field. All the more so in places whose pedigree is famed and illustrious, like Nahalal's. Here, the standards are more stringent, and anyone who leaves the path of the straight and narrow, who veers left or right, up or down—even a single mistake made in one's childhood—is not forgotten. Especially someone considered odd, eccentric, meshugah, or an underachiever, which is the complete opposite of *mutzlach*, one of the loftiest expressions of excellence the village bestows upon its most fortunate sons and daughters, those blessed with wisdom, industriousness, leadership qualities, and community spirit.

But after many years in the city the combination of the words "what" and "they'll say about you" and "in the village" had lost some of their power and threat. So I reconsidered and

decided to take up the gauntlet or, more accurately, the sandals. I put them on, thrust the notes for the speech I had prepared into my pocket, and set out for the inauguration of the old arms cache with my red-painted toenails exposed. The entire household eyed me—some with mirth, others with regret, some with *schadenfreude*, others with suspicion: Would I return to be reunited with my home and family? And in what condition?

Here I must admit and confess that despite my display of courage upon leaving the house, I became more and more anxious the closer I got to the event. By the time I arrived at the site I was absolutely beside myself. I silently prayed that no one would notice my toes, and my prayers were answered. No one made a single comment, nobody said a thing. On the contrary, everyone was warm and cordial. My hand was crushed by bold handshakes, my shoulder bent by manly slaps on the back. Even my short speech went off well and pleased the crowd—or so it seemed to me.

Naturally, I made metaphorical use of the arms cache as an image of memory and what is hidden in the depths of a person's soul. In the manner of writers, I prattled on about that which is above the surface and that which is below, that which the eye sees and that which it does not, and from there it was a short road to the tried-and-true literary merchandise of "reality" and the "relationship between truth and fiction in belles letters" and a lot of other fodder that writers blithely use to sell their wares.

After I had finished speaking and descended from the small stage and was able to breathe in relief, one of the daughters of the family on whose property the arms cache had been built approached and asked to exchange a few words with me in private. She thanked me for my speech and said it had been just fine, but then, almost as an afterthought, she added that she wished to know which nail polish was my favorite. She said she

very much liked the shade of red I used, as did two friends of hers sitting in the audience who had asked her to find out.

And as that same shade of red flushed across my cheeks, the young woman hastened to add that she herself had no problem with it, that she even found it rather nice, something she had always felt was missing in the village and could be a happy harbinger of things to come. However, to others in the audience my appearance at the event had raised some reservations.

"I thought no one had noticed," I said.

"Not noticed? It's all anyone's been talking about," she said. "But take consolation in the fact that no one was surprised. I even heard someone say, 'What do you want from the guy? He got it from Tonia. She was crazy in just the same way. That's the way it is in their family.'"

## 2

Tonia was my grandmother, my mother's mother, and in my eyes she was not at all crazy. She was different. She was distinctive. She was what we call a "character." She was not an easy person, and that's putting it mildly. But crazy? No. However, as in other matters, not everyone agrees with me. Other people have different opinions, both in the village and in the family.

The story I am about to tell here deals with my grandmother and her "sweeper." That is what we call the vacuum cleaner sent to her by Uncle Yeshayahu, the older brother of Grandpa Aharon, her husband. From the outset I wish to make it known that I am aware that "sweeper" and "vacuum cleaner" are two different appliances, but Grandma Tonia called her vacuum cleaner

“the sweeper,” so from that day until this very day we call every vacuum cleaner by the same name, using the same accent—her rolling Russian *r* and her deep Russian *ee*.

As for Uncle Yeshayahu, I never met him, but from childhood I heard stories about him that attested to his problematic, if not negative and harmful, personality. In the days of the Second Aliyah, prior to World War I, when Jewish pioneers were draining the swamps and settling the land, Uncle Yeshayahu chose to emigrate to America and make the desert of Los Angeles bloom instead. And to make matters worse, he changed his name to Sam, set himself up in business, and made money by exploiting the hard work of the proletariat.

The two brothers were sons of a Hasidic family and both left religion. But while Grandpa Aharon converted to another fervent faith, that of Socialism and Zionism, his older brother found his place in the world of American capitalism. Grandpa Aharon never forgave him for that. He even called him “the double traitor” for being neither a Socialist nor a Zionist.

As for the sweeper itself, it was a large and powerful vacuum cleaner made by General Electric, the likes of which had never before been seen in our village, in the Jezreel Valley, or in all of Palestine—nor has such an appliance ever been seen since. That is what my mother told me, still astounded by it at the telling. It sported a chrome-topped canister, huge and sparkling, she said, and large, silent rubber wheels and a strong electric motor and a thick and flexible suction tube. Still, with all the respect and affection I have for it, and in spite of the fact that the vacuum cleaner is the hero of this story, I must admit right now, up front, that this story is not one of our family’s most important. It is not a love story, though it contains love. It is not a story of death, though quite a number of the story’s heroes have passed away. It is not a story of treason and revenge, though both can be found in it. And it does not play host to the pain of other

family stories, connected though it is by the suffering found therein as well.

In short, this is not one of the stories that wakes up with us, walks about with us, and stays with us, until we lie down, but rather a story that we tell to one another in pleasant circumstances, passing it from the first generation to those that did not know Grandpa Aharon or the sweeper sent by his brother to Grandma Tonia, or even Tonia herself.

Perhaps I will write the extended story of my extended family in another book at another time. I will tell of my parents and their parents, of all the Jabbok streams they crossed and the squabbles they squabbled. I will describe the hard labor their bodies endured and the incarcerations their hearts suffered. I will rouse my pen to the duels of love, the ideological power struggles, the championships of affliction, the fights for control over the wells of memory. I will name the well-known lunatics and the unknown lunatics. I will write about the abducted daughter and the deposed sons—and all this, ladies and gentlemen, as part and parcel of the Zionist revolution.

If I do write that book it will not be today or tomorrow or in the coming years. I will write it when I am older and bolder, more forgiving and more temperate. And even this promise I do not promise to keep. In the meantime, in this slight book, I wish to tell one story only: that of Grandma Tonia and her sweeper, which Uncle Yeshayahu sent from the United States.

The story, as I have already mentioned, is a true story, its heroes real and their names real. But as with all its brethren in our family, this story, too, has several versions, each one containing exaggerations and additions and deletions and augmentations. And there is one more thing I need to say, a sort of explanation for what is to come: here and there I will add a small side story, one that is necessary for comprehension and

orientation; I will rouse a forgotten affair from its slumber, summoning images from the beyond. Here and there a chuckle will replace a moan and tears will give way to laughter.

### 3

My grandfather on my mother's side, Aharon Ben-Barak, was born in 1890 and grew up in the town of Makarov in Ukraine. He was nineteen years old when he came to Palestine and, like many of his friends, pioneers of the Second Aliyah, he wandered the country and passed through many places: Zichron Yaacov and Hulda, Ben Shemen and Kfar Uriah, Be'er Yaacov—which he and Grandma Tonia pronounced “Beryakov”—and other farms and colonies. Because he passed from place to place and had observant eyes and a sensitive heart and a sense of humor and a talent for writing, he published occasional articles and reports in a broadsheet called *The Young Laborer*.

His first wife, Shoshanna Pekker, from the village of Rokitno in Ukraine, bore him two sons: Itamar, my oldest uncle, and Binyamin, whom everyone called Binya. In 1920 Shoshanna contracted malaria and died young. Three years later several other family members came to Palestine from Rokitno: Shoshanna's half brother Yaacov and half sister Tonia, along with their mother, Batya. The father of the family, Mordechai Zvi, had come earlier and died, and Tonia's older brothers Moshe and Yitzhak were already living here.

Aharon Ben-Barak, widower and father of two small children, and Tonia Pekker, an eighteen-year-old maiden, decided to marry. Many years later, after I had joined the family and had grown up and become one of the people before whom she





*The family in the courtyard, Nahalal, 1925*

poured the bitter words from her bitter heart, Grandma Tonia would tell me again and again her version of the story of their marriage: “This is how it was: I was a young girl who did not know the ways of the world and he was experienced, older than me by fourteen years, and he made me promises and he told me stories, and this is what happened . . .”

“This is how it was”: these were the words she always used for beginning any story she told. She pronounced them in her thick Russian accent. Her children—my mother, her brothers and sister—also said “This is how it was,” with the same accent, when they began a story. And not only they. To this very day, we all use this opening and that accent when we want to say “This is the truth. What I am about to tell is precisely what happened.”

There are those who say that Grandpa Aharon did in fact fall in love with Grandma Tonia the moment he caught sight of her as she alighted from the ship. There are those who whisper that, as is *de rigueur* in Russian novels, he even threatened to

kill himself if she did not respond to his wooing. Grandma Tonia herself made that claim, adding that Grandpa Aharon even said he would throw himself into the Jordan River. Why the Jordan River? Well, hanging oneself is not suited to this sort of suicide. Sleeping pills and tall buildings were unavailable. Pistols (which they pronounced “pissles”) were hard to come by and ammunition was rare and expensive; a person who wasted a bullet on taking his own life was therefore guilty of egoism and doomed to social condemnation. And then there was the Jordan: poetic, romantic, not as large as the rivers they had in Russia but with an aura all its own. What’s more, it was nearby and convenient; “In the Land of Israel everything is close,” Grandpa Aharon himself told me many years later, during a conversation in which he denied everything that Grandma Tonia had said about this incident.

Others related that Grandpa Aharon had wanted Grandma Tonia for a simpler and more practical reason: he hoped she would raise the two small boys her sister had borne him and be a good mother to them. But that did not happen; Grandma Tonia’s relationship with Shoshanna’s sons is an open wound in our family history. Shoshanna and Tonia were also born to their father and two different mothers, causing some to claim that after two generations of second marriages and children from two mothers, the matter is far more complicated than anything I have tried to describe up to this point.

As stated, Grandpa Aharon was a Second Aliyah pioneer while Grandma Tonia came during the Third Aliyah, in the early twenties. He was among the “founders of Nahalal” while she was considered “an early settler of Nahalal.” However, in spite of these differences, to which members of the oldest moshavim and kibbutzim attach huge importance, they managed to bring five children into the world: Micha, Batya—my mother—the twins Menahem and Batsheva, and Yair, the child of their old

age. All five were born with a talent for storytelling, and many of those stories were about their mother.

“She arrived from Russia,” my mother told me about Tonia, “a young woman with her hair in braids and wearing a high school girl’s uniform, drinking her tea like this, with her pinky finger extended alongside the glass, and she came straight to the valley, to the dust and dirt and hard work and mud . . .”

I sensed she wished to understand and explain her, maybe even forgive her for something: “She came here, discovered that all the promises of property owned by her father were untrue, that Grandpa Aharon, who had many virtues and talents, was no great farmer, and she sank into a life of labor and deprivation. And yet, she made up her mind not to be broken, not to return to Russia or desert to America or run off to Tel Aviv. We didn’t have an easy time of it with her, but the entire family has her to thank for this farm.”

Indeed, Grandpa Aharon was inclined toward things other than agriculture. I have already related that on occasion he penned reports and articles for *The Young Laborer* and in Nahalal he wrote and edited a satirical bulletin called *The Mosquito*. The Seder nights he organized were renowned. After families finished their individual Seders at home they would gather in the village hall, where he would lead a riotous Seder of his own, with stinging send-ups of people and events from the village and the movement that he wrote himself, all to the tune of songs from the Passover Hagaddah.

However, the next morning he still had to wake up and continue plowing and milking and sowing and reaping, and it happened on occasion that he could no longer endure the responsibility and the burden, and Grandpa Aharon would announce that his head hurt and then he would run off, and Grandma Tonia would say, “He’s ‘runoff’ again,” and she would chase him down and bring him back.

“It was a tragedy for him and for her,” my mother told me. “My father should have lived a different life in a different place. A life more suited to his personality and his talents. But she was determined to hang on to the farm by the skin of her teeth, and she sank those teeth into the earth and into the house and into us and into him. And since every person needs an enemy, hers was dirt.”

## 4

The first Nahalal settlers lived in tents, after which they moved to wooden huts; the first proper buildings erected were for the animals, not the people. Only in 1936—fifteen years after Nahalal was established—were homes built for the farmers and the village wired for electricity. This fact has great importance since the main character of the story, of any story, must take action. And the main character of this particular story is an electrical appliance, the vacuum cleaner.

Each family inaugurated its home as it saw fit. I do not know what other families did, but Grandma Tonia arranged a small and special ceremony whose meaning and influence was not understood by all: she wrapped the handle of the front door with a small rag. The house was new and clean, she explained, and the handle was new and shiny, and the rag was meant to keep it from getting stained or dirty.

Everyone laughed, but within a few days it became clear that that little rag, seemingly so innocent, was itself a kind of pioneer. Other rags followed, each placed on a handle of every door in the house and on some of the drawer handles as well,

and those of the windows and cupboards. The rags remained there until their—and her—final day.

Grandma Tonia placed another rag over her left shoulder. This rag was larger than all its brothers: it was aware of its own importance and primacy, a kind of guard rag that accompanied her everywhere she went and was meant for immediate intervention—say she needed to blot out a speck of dirt that had escaped her notice and was suddenly discovered, or she happened upon some implement that needed cleaning, or she had to wipe her hands before she touched something clean that did not have a rag of its own.

Even I, who was born twelve years after the house was built, remember clearly her shoulder rag and all its comrades dangling from handles like little battle flags, protecting them from the touch of hands or fingers. In those days, working hands were praised and prized by one and all, the hands of the builder and the laborer and the guard and especially the farmer, as they planted and reaped and milked and harvested. Grandma Tonia, too, was a hardworking farmer and her hands labored at every chore, but she was also a realistic woman, and she knew that with all due respect to farmwork in general and, specifically, to labor carried out by Zionist pioneering hands, the hands of a farmer touched every kind of dirt: mud and dust, cow dung and chicken dung, the “black lotion” applied to trees and the black grease used on machines. And all this pretty stuff was merely looking for a clean place to stick to and make filthy. Even if a person washed his hands well, he left spots, or worse: permanent stains.

At the time, the house consisted of three rooms plus a kitchen and a bathroom and a front door that faced the street and a back door that faced the yard. Concrete was poured by the back

door to form what we called “the platform,” and it was on this wide slab that most family business was conducted. I had not been born yet, and later the stories about the platform would fill me with envy. This is where they sat and talked, where they shucked corn and peeled potatoes, where they plucked and quartered pigeons and chickens, where they kneaded dough and let stories rise, where they pickled cucumbers, preserved fruit, made jams. This is also where Uncle Yitzhak, Grandma Tonia’s brother, dismantled the vacuum cleaner sent by Uncle Yeshayahu, discovering its secrets and its shame, but we shall come to that—everything in its time.

The jams simmered in a large copper basin passed from house to house in the village and placed on a bonfire in the yard. At our house the bonfire burned in the shade of the pomegranate tree next to the platform, and the jams kept for a very long time in their sealed jars. One day, many years after Grandma Tonia’s death, I found such a jar in the old wooden hut and opened it with a can opener. A wisp of bonfire smoke rose from it and, as happens with bonfire smoke, it caused my eyes to tear.

Some fifteen years after the house was built it was enlarged and renovated. The old kitchen became an additional bedroom, a new kitchen was built atop the platform, and next to it a covered porch, along with a shower and toilet. This is the house as I came to know it. I remember it well, inside and out, and I recall how Grandma Tonia looked after it zealously.

First of all, she insisted that people enter through the back door and never the front, because if a guest came in through the front door he would find himself in the preserved and forbidden part of the house. Every time someone knocked at the front door, her resolute cry issued from inside the house: “Around back! Come in the second door!” and the guest would have to circle the house—without letting his foot step onto earth from the paved pathway, thereby bringing in mud or dust—only to

find that here, too, he could not enter unless he was a particularly important and special visitor.

Grandma Tonia liked having guests, but her “house-pitality” did not include actually allowing guests into the house; she preferred entertaining outside. Visitors sat on the porch and Grandma Tonia would bring out glasses of tea, cookies with jam centers, fruit. They no doubt wondered what was inside the house that made her guard it so carefully. The lucky few who were granted permission to enter in fact found a modest and completely ordinary home with a small kitchen on the right side, a hallway ending at a shower and toilet, and a “dining room” on the left side. I put dining room in quotes because it was that only in name. The room was used for dining just once a year, for the Seder night. The rest of the time it was slept in, and meals were eaten on the porch or in the kitchen.

From the dining room another small hallway veered off and led to the older part of the house. It was here, my mother told me, that the family had first lived, after years in the hut. Her eyes shone when she spoke about it. It was a house full of life and activity and song and humor. But when Grandma and Grandpa’s children grew up and moved out, that wing was closed off for good, and that is how I remember it—sealed off and forbidden. This wing had a room for select and special guests and two rooms completely out of bounds to all human-kind, including family members and even “relations of blood” (Grandma Tonia differentiated between “relations of blood” and “relations of no blood”). But this, too, is not part of the story I am trying to tell here, the story of a vacuum cleaner sent to her by her brother-in-law from America.

Here, in these two locked rooms, she kept her “furnishings.” To the reader picturing mahogany and ebony, commodes and cabinets, I must say that this was the simplest of furniture: there was a cupboard that I am tempted to call the “holy ark” but will

not. There was a sofa upon which no person ever stretched out and two small armchairs in which no person ever sat, a sideboard with drawers and doors that remained unopened and in which could be found cutlery that knew no table or diner. As a child I suspected that this cutlery lived only in the minds of my mother and her sister, Batsheva, and since in our family memory and imagination are two names for the same thing, I doubted their existence. However, after Grandma Tonia's death I saw them with my own eyes.

In the adjacent room there was a double bed with a tall metal headboard painted dark brown to resemble wood. In the past it had served as Grandma and Grandpa's bed, but in my day no one slept in it. It felt neither the weight nor the heat of any body, not the tossing and turning of the restless sleeper, not the hum of a dreamer or the thrum of lovers—"The bed knew love when there was love," as one relative put it deftly—and not the touch of a blanket or sheet other than the one used to cover it and protect it from dust.

Not only the bed, but all its cellmates—the armchairs and the regular chairs and the sofa and the table and the cupboard and the sideboard—were draped in such old-sheet shrouds. No person reclined on them, no eyes beheld them other than those of Grandma Tonia, who entered there in order to "pass a rag" over them and ensure that none was dirty or had escaped. But once a year, in honor of the Seder night, the regular chairs were removed and brought to the dining room, which is how I was allowed to visit the holy of holies, for it was prior to Passover in my eighth year of life that I was deemed mature enough and responsible enough to be called upon to help with the holiday preparations.

I remember that day quite clearly. I stood behind Grandma Tonia, curious and excited. She inserted the key and turned it,



opened the door, and said, "You are permitted to enter, but do not touch anything."

I entered, my first time in her forbidden rooms. As I write these words I recall my last time in those rooms as well, some thirty years later, when we came down from the cemetery to the house after burying her. But back then she was alive and she opened the locked door with a key she had fished from her pocket.

A cool silence, dim and limpid, greeted me. The air inside had been standing so long that it felt to my skin like water. The windows and shutters were closed. The rags that protected the handles had nearly disintegrated with age, as if woven like lace. Everything was white and clear and slack and clean, so clean that two sunrays that had found their way through cracks in the shutters encountered no motes of dust as they did in other rooms; they merely left two spots of trembling light on the wall.

Grandma Tonia removed the covering from one of the chairs that stood in the corner. It blinked its wooden eyes, exposed and blinded.

"Can you take it to the dining room?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"On your own?"

"Yes."

"Lift it up. Don't drag it across the clean floor on me and don't scratch me the walls with it."

In addition to the richness and the literariness and the accent, her Hebrew had another characteristic: every verb was directed at herself. Chairs were dragged on her, clean sidewalks were dirtied on her, painted walls were scratched on her. "Scratch" is an old family verb still current in our dictionary of expressions and idioms. It is derived from the Yiddish word for "scratch," but we use it only for describing scratches on walls.

A language must describe many worlds: the realistic world

in which it lives and works, and the frightening, wishful, imaginary worlds in which it and the people who speak it would like or not like to live. In many realistic houses in that realistic period of time, hallway walls and dining-room walls and kitchen walls were painted with oil paint some five feet high so they could be washed. Grandma Tonia, who fulfilled the wall-washing commandment on a daily basis, considered a scratch in the oil paint to be such grave damage that she gave it its own name: scritch.

Taking the greatest care not to scritch a single scritch, I brought the chair to the dining room for her and placed it there for her. It looked around, uncomfortable in its sudden nakedness and the freedom and the strong light, so exposed and so near to the simple chairs that had arrived from the porch and the kitchen. The latter were accustomed to the light and the company, to being looked at and touched, and they told joyful, gossipy stories among themselves—so said my mother—about all kinds of rear ends they had happened to meet, while the locked-room chair was pleased and satisfied at being let out into the open and liberated, though he knew it was for only one night and that he was destined to meet only a single rear end, and that after Seder night he would be cleaned with a large brush, washed with soap and water, then dried and finally wrapped in his old sheet and returned to his prison until the next Passover, the Holiday of Freedom.

## 5

I mentioned before that in Grandma Tonia's house there were two bathrooms, the old one and the new. In the new one there was only a shower, but in the old one there was a real bath

as well. When her children were still at home it was in use, but once they had grown up and moved away it was closed off forever.

Bathrooms, my mother explained to me, are shiftier rooms and very dangerous. Strangely enough, it is bathrooms—whose main purpose is cleanliness—that are astonishing in their capacity for making dirt and getting dirty: the tiles, the floor, the faucets, the various sanitary appliances. You don't need to be a genius to understand that people who use showers are dirty, otherwise they would not have any use for the shower. And a person that dirty enters the shower and leaves behind him all the filth he wishes to remove from his body. He drips turbid water on the clean floor, he smudges the clean tiles with his fingers, and he leaves all sorts of stains and marks behind him.

In winter the family bathed in the house, but in summer, outside—the adults in an “excellent shower,” as Grandma Tonia called it, which was nothing more than a sort of pipe that ran alongside the wall of the cowshed. Children, on the other hand, bathed in the “trough,” which I shall explain later. Over the years, the bathing conditions improved: next to the chick run a laundry house was set up where there was actually hot running water, thanks to a huge chimney boiler. At first, pruned tree branches and dried ears of corn were burned there, but later a device was installed that dripped oil, drop by drop. I can still bring to mind the sound of the unique way it burned, a sort of dull and mysterious roar that was nothing like any other sound and very pleasant to the ear of a child while at the same time frightening.

As with every other home, there was, in Grandma Tonia's house, a half bathroom known as the “restroom.” In spite of its name, however, people were not invited to rest there. According to one version of my father's first visit to the family home in Nahalal, when he was courting my mother, he naively entered

the restroom and found it spotlessly clean. The toilet seat was down, and on top of it a newspaper was spread, on top of which was placed a wooden board, and on top of that another newspaper on which stood a *wundertopf* that held a stovetop plum cake in the process of cooling.

This is the place to mention two things. The first is that Grandma Tonia was a wizard at anything made with plums: her plum cake and plum jam were works of art. The second is that my father was called more than once in the village a “tiligent” and a “tilignat”—words used by the villagers to describe city folk who wore glasses and read and wrote books instead of working. Still, some of the tiligents and tilignats were actually intelligent, and my father understood that the restroom of his future mother-in-law was not designed for its initial purpose. So instead of carrying through with his plan he held it in and reached for the cake, eating half of it before exiting the restroom with an innocent look on his face. The matter did not improve relations between them, but I will get to that later.

I, too, had an incident with the restroom. When I was four or five years old and staying at her house, Grandma Tonia caught me by the restroom door and demanded to know where, in my opinion, I was headed.

“Here,” I said, pointing at the closed door, not comprehending the problem.

“Do you have to do number one or number two?” she asked.

“Number one.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, told me I could do that outside, and at once steered me, gently but forcefully—Grandma Tonia was short of stature but very strong—out the door and into the yard, where she explained that next to the cowshed there was an old outhouse from the days in which the family had lived in a hut, and if I wanted I could also use the sluice that carries away the muck from the cows or I could water the special citrus tree

that Grandpa had planted and grafted, about which I shall also tell later on.

“And don’t go there empty-handed,” she said, handing me a small bag of rubbish. “If you’re going out anyway, then take this with you and toss it into the muck.”

Grandma Tonia could not stand dirt anywhere inside or near the house, even if it had already been collected and bagged and thrown into the trash bin, whose very purpose was to contain it. Anyone heading out back got some garbage from her wrapped in a newspaper or an old paper bag from the village store, and often she added a request: “Returning back, bring a few eggs from the chickens.”

“Don’t go empty-handed” and “returning back” were her standard instructions, and they meant: don’t just walk about aimlessly, strolling in the fields, gazing at the view. This is a farm and there is a lot of work to be done and there is always something to take, to bring, to move from one place to another, to toss out, to hand over.

I took-out-for-her the garbage, went-into-for-her the yard, and watered-for-her Grandpa’s special citrus tree on the way, while Grandma hastened to the restroom door, inspected the handle I had already touched, wiped it clean with the large rag thrown over her shoulder, resettled the small rag that belonged there, and closed the door.

This is how I remember her syntax and her house, whether by her self-directed verbs or the “second door” around back or the covered front porch with the wraparound bench or the kitchen and dining room, the hall painted with oil paint and the closed doors of the rooms. More than once I asked my mother what was behind all those doors with all the rags dangling from the handles. She explained that “here is the shower one may not shower in and here is the restroom one may not rest in and here are the bedrooms one may not bed down in, and here,” she said,

standing beside the old bathroom, the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary, where there was a real bathtub, “here is where the vacuum cleaner lives, her sweeper.”

“Her sweeper?” I asked expectantly and with joy, because my mother pronounced the word just as her mother did—“svieeperrr”—turning the *w* into a *v* and deepening the two *e*’s and clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth so that the English *r* became a Russian *rrr*. Such an imitation brought joyful connotations, a story hiding just beyond view. And not just one of the same old stories that she and her siblings always told me about prancing horses and flying donkeys and the neighbors’ grandfather who was so small he rode rabbits at night, but a wondrous story about a mysterious creature called the “sweeper” who was imprisoned in the forbidden bathroom in Grandma’s house, right here behind the locked door.

“Tell me about him.”

“About her sweeper? What’s there to tell about a vacuum cleaner?”

“Tell me, please. Please!”

“It’s a vacuum cleaner that Uncle Yeshayahu sent her from America.”

“America?” I repeated, dumbfounded. America did not appear regularly in family stories.

“Yes, from America. Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.”

That required a deep breath. So many important names, forbidden and alluring, in one single sentence.