



chapter one

I S R A E L

I am an Israeli, eighth generation sabra, an offspring of families who lived in the land long before it was called “Israel.” My grandmother was born in Safed, my mother in Hebron, and I in Jerusalem. My birth name is Haya. My native language is Hebrew. I have a bachelor’s degree in both Hebrew literature and English literature. But at the age of twenty-three, I turned my back on my native Hebrew to pursue English studies in England. Before leaving Israel, I changed my name to Shelly. I completed my master’s degree in England and returned to Israel to obtain my doctorate in English at Bar-Ilan University. In 1980, I emigrated to America. Now I am a tenured professor of English at Western New England College in Massachusetts. I am proud to be an American, and yet I live in conflict, in division.

After nineteen years in America, I cannot get Israel out of my mind. I am in love with it, yearning for it, angry with it. It appears in my dreams, sweet or threatening, earthly or metaphysical, the land of heady orange blossoms and whispering pine trees, the land of my childhood terrors. Where is my home? Can one have two homes? Two languages? Can one enter two promised lands? Entering one is hard enough. Entering two is an impossibility, a paradox, hubris itself. My world is rent. My philosophy—eclectic. My being—a journey, a diversity, a longing. How can I find meaning in my checkered patterns? Perhaps only by telling my story.



I come from families of Jewish leaders, thinkers, and artists. In my family tree one can find the philosopher Ahad Ha'am and the musicians Hefzibah and Yehudi Menuhin, as well as lesser known rabbis, judges, doctors, and lawyers. Many of my forebears were active on behalf of Jewry and dedicated to Eretz Israel. Among them were Jews who perished in pogroms, in Palestine or in Europe. There were those who lived in the Diaspora, and there were those, perhaps most, who lived in Palestine—in Hebron, Jerusalem, and Safed.

On my mother's side, I am a descendant of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745–1813), the founder of the Habad Hasidic movement, whose granddaughter, Menucha Rachel Slonim, emigrated to Israel from Poland and settled in Safed. She came to die in the Holy Land, but her vitality kept her this side of the grave a good number of years; she worked energetically for a yeshiva in Safed and dedicated her life to her family and to mitzvot. According to legend, people came from far and wide to seek her blessing, and she would put her hands on their heads and effect healing.

On my father's side, I am first generation sabra. Although my father, who came to Palestine from Belorussia, cannot boast of ancestors who struck roots in the land, as my mother can, he does boast of a brother who participated in the creation of the state of Israel. My uncle, Moshe Chaim Shapira, who later became the first interior minister of Israel (from 1949 to 1952 and from 1959 to 1970), was passionately committed to the ingathering of Jews from the Diaspora. In 1938, when union between Germany and Austria took place, he organized a rescue mission of Viennese Jews. During the War of Independence he was responsible for the mass immigration of Jews to Israel. His actions were inspired by a vision of a Jewish homeland where Jews would live in harmony with each other. He was known as a peacemaker who could appease warring factions in the government and in the country.

Thus, on both sides, my family is decidedly Jewish, often bears the marks of Jewish history, and amply exemplifies Jewish achievement and grace. Most members of my family have also been loyal Israelis and Zionists. Some were more devoted to religion, and some to the land of Israel—but they knew

Eretz Israel The land of Israel

mitzvot Good deeds

where they belonged. They had a strong and clear sense of commitment, which was as natural in their lives as the sap is to the tree.

How is it conceivable that I would choose to live in many worlds and fully commit myself to none? How is it possible that I would reject my forebears' commitment to Israel and to the Jewish community and, instead, choose America and Western culture? Why didn't I stay in one place? Whence this restlessness, this wanderlust?

BROKEN VESSELS

Since many of my ancestors were Hasidim, I like to describe my parents' divorce in Kabbalistic terms as "the breaking of the vessels." According to Scholem, as divine light was poured into the vessels during Creation, it "was too strong to be held" by some of them, and so "one after another they broke, the pieces scattering and falling." This shattering of the vessels brought evil to the world. The only way to restore the broken vessels is through the process of *tikkun*, the repairing and the healing, the making whole of that which is rent. Most of my life, I have been dedicated to the *tikkun* of my broken pieces. Maybe this is my way of being Jewish, of seeking God, of learning and forgiving.

My parents must have married for love. Blind, passionate love. Otherwise they wouldn't have leapt over the abyss separating the ultra-Orthodox way of life from the secular. My father was (and still is) a devout Orthodox Jew. Unlike his brother, Moshe Chaim Shapira, my father had no political ambitions and few Zionist affiliations. His being found its most eloquent expression in religion. My mother came from a so-called traditional home. My grandmother kept a kosher kitchen and fasted on Yom Kippur even when her health was failing. Yet my mother felt little attraction for the rigors of religion. She longed for the freedom and the beauty of Western culture—concerts, theaters, fashion. She learned to hate the *shtetl* life in the *Me'ah She'arim* section in Jerusalem, where she and my father lived. So why did she marry him? She didn't know he was *that* religious (she says) and she was taken in by his knowledge and charm. Why did he marry her? She was very beautiful, and she lied to him (he says) about her religious devotion. He too was taken in.

shtetl Closely-knit Jewish communities in small towns of east Europe

Furthermore, both of them remind me, a miracle occurred that seemed to indicate that it was a marriage made in heaven. A few days before the wedding, my mother visited a dentist who lost a needle in her mouth, and before he could retrieve it, she swallowed it. My father's community was in an uproar. What did it mean? they asked each other in horror. Was it a sign from the *sitra abra*, the demonic domain? Shouldn't the wedding be canceled? Meanwhile, the needle continued its meandering in my mother's intestines. My father's community consulted the learned leader, Chazon Ish, who predicted that the needle, with God's help, would leave my mother's body naturally. And so it was. One or two days before the wedding, the needle came out from the opposite opening through which it came in, causing no damage to my mother's intestines, or to her soul. The *Me'ah She'arim* neighborhood burst in jubilation. People danced in the streets, carrying my father on their shoulders. Who could have thought that after such a stunning divine signal, my parents' marriage would end in divorce?

Yet my mother's happiness was short-lived. At times I look at her pictures from that period—a beautiful woman, with blue eyes, short blond curls, soft, sensuous lips, dressed in black, from her black woolen socks to her black head-covering—and imagine her chagrin. How she must have hated covering her wrists and ankles. How she must have grumbled under the burden of religious rituals. Once, she told me, my father caught her making grape juice for me on the Sabbath and commanded her angrily to stop “working.” She retorted that she was only feeding me, but she stopped squashing the grapes and resented my father and “his” religion. Thus, the worship that gave my father joy galled my mother; the faith that uplifted him oppressed her. Dylan Thomas's images best capture my parents' paradoxical existence. “The force that drives the water through the rocks” drove my father's “red blood.” But that same force turned my mother's blood “to wax.”

My father's community was dismayed when my parents sought divorce. In the ultra-Orthodox society of the 1940s, divorce was altogether rare. But who would have dared to contemplate the rending of a marriage made in heaven? How could Dina and Zorah Shapira be separated? Yet my parents could no longer live together. They argued constantly. They resented each other silently. They grew bitter, impatient. Their love, which for a spell bridged over the deepest division in the Israeli nation, could no longer hold. When they realized, after five years of marriage, that their compromises were in tatters and could no longer cover the nakedness of their estrangement, they agreed to separate. I was five years old.



*My mother in her religious period, with a head covering, and me at two years old.
Tel Aviv beach*

THE ORPHANAGE

The storm raged over my head, but the adults were too preoccupied to pay attention to the feelings of a five-year-old. As soon as the divorce was in effect, my mother started working as a nurse on night-shifts in Hadassah Hospital in Tel Aviv. Longings for her, she says, brought my father to the hospital one night; for the last time, he pleaded with her to return to him. But she could not return to the ultra-Orthodox community. Although the divorce brought fear and shame to her life, she could not countenance the imprisonment of her marriage.

It was then that I was sent to the religious orphanage *Beit Ha'yeled* in Pardes-Hannah. Who sent me? I don't know. My mother says that my father forced her to send me to a religious institution. My father says that he didn't even know I was in the orphanage until much later. How long was I there? My father says a year. My mother says six months. Why didn't I stay with my father? He says that his rabbi had forbidden him to live alone with his daughter. Why didn't I stay with my mother? She says that she couldn't keep me because she worked nights. Where was the family? My uncle Abraham (pronounced Avram) and my aunts Ruth and Naomi (Nomi) were too young to take care of me. But my aunts Bracha and Zipporah were of age. Where were they? I was never told. After my stay in the orphanage, I lived with my grandmother in Tiberias for a few months. Why didn't she take me out of the orphanage before? I do not know. Mystery surrounds this, the most crucial event in my life, the event that plunged me into darkness, ripped apart my innocence, and rendered part of my being a waif and a wanderer.

For years I tried to find out information on the orphanage in Pardes-Hannah. I questioned every relative, my mother's sisters in particular. But the more I asked, the less I knew. My aunts, even my favorite, Aunt Ruth, always checked with my mother first, and she had a number of versions and an even greater number of instructions for them. I sensed their caution and mistrusted their stories. In time, details became blurred and nobody could remember what actually happened, when, and how. Finally, I gave up the attempt to discover the exact truth in this Rashomon-like maze and settled for my own version of my history.

It begins with a girl named Haya who was brought to an orphanage in Pardes-Hannah. I remember a squeaky gate, dusty palm and eucalyptus trees, red sands. I am running to the squeaky gate, always, to see if *Imma* is coming. No. Not today. Perhaps tomorrow. I turn away from the gate and climb the steps slowly. The teacher Techiya scowls at me from the top of the stairs,



On my mother's arm by Lake Kinneret. Tiberias

“Haya,” she says, shaking her finger at me, “the sun has already set and look how dirty you are. What is this? Where were you? And Haya, don’t think I haven’t seen you putting your bread in Shoshana’s plate. You don’t eat, and your mother accuses us of starving you! Now go wash quickly and don’t forget to say the *Shema* prayer before you go to bed.” My father calls me Haya’le. She calls me Haya. A wild animal. Me. Tomorrow *Imma* will come.

Night is crouching over Pardes-Hannah. The girls in the room are sleeping, but I cannot sleep. Strange smells. At the end of the room one girl is coughing. Is she sick? Perhaps if I prayed *Shema*, I would be sleeping already. *Abba* wants me to pray, but *Imma* warned me not even to think of praying. *Abba* loves God, but *Imma* hates God. What am I to do? Whom do I believe? *Imma*, because *Abba* hasn’t come to see me yet. The last time I saw him, he caressed my cheek with his warm, silky hand, bent down to kiss me with his scratchy beard, and said, “You won’t forget to pray, Haya’le, what?” and then he was gone. My father. Always laughing. Always humming tunes. Always going away.

The night is breathing heavily. When I close my eyes tight, I see scary shapes. When I open them, I see a room like a hospital. By the streetlamp,



With my mother in the orphanage at Pardes-Hannah. I am five.

the shadow of the eucalyptus tree is swaying back and forth, like my father when he is praying. Br..r..r... Shoshana has been asleep for a long time. Today, during recess, she stuck her tongue out at me because I said that the cracks in the tree trunk we saw lying in the forest remind me of a laughing fox. She says foxes never enter tree trunks. She says foxes never laugh. She says I am a very stupid girl. Perhaps I should try to pray again. Only I don't remember the words. What will happen if I don't pray? Will my breathing stop during the night? I am yawning and yawning. Perhaps all the air will fizzle out of me, as from a balloon, and in the morning they will find me dead! *Imma!*

Imma is not here, I told you, not here. She'll come tomorrow. Those shapes are running around like wild animals. I am sure I saw a laughing fox, no matter what Shoshana says. Perhaps he is waiting for me outside, under the eucalyptus tree. Must think about something else. I already know how to read eleven letters, *Imma*. I love the letters, especially on the big cards the teachers show us. And I imagine, *Imma*, what I would do if a big נ came to visit me. I would climb on her like a tree. Then I would swing on ן and slide on ג. ך is boring, but ן is like a beautiful gate, not a bit like the squeaky gate of the orphanage. ן is even more than a gate, perhaps a door to a house, but I don't like her because she reminds me of Haya. ם is a funny letter, and ך is small, like me, but ן is almost like an automobile, and if I just add wheels, she'll take me far, far away from here.

There. The night is quiet. Perhaps tomorrow I'll meet new letters. Perhaps tomorrow you'll come, *Imma*. If I pray silently, you won't hear me. "Hear, O Israel . . . the Lord is our God . . . the Lord is One."



DENIAL

To be born in Tel Aviv in 1940 and turn eight about four weeks before the Declaration of Israel's Independence was to grow up in the shadow of monumental history, to be dwarfed by a narrative stretching between catastrophe and redemption. It could dry up an early appreciation for anything personal, for private language, private space, private time, even private life.

—Yaron Ezrahi, *Rubber Bullets: Power and Conscience in Modern Israel*

Within a year of her divorce, my mother married my stepfather, Reuven, a veterinary doctor and a secular immigrant from Latvia. My father remarried an ultra-Orthodox woman and emigrated to America, where, one by one, ten children were born to them. Meanwhile, in Israel, my new family moved to Yavne'el, a small *moshav* near Tiberias, and my life turned into a fairy tale. I was mothered and stepfathered; I was fussed over, cared for, pampered, and spoiled. I had friends, a dog, fields of wheat around my house, gnarly fig trees

to climb on, long hair to be braided each morning, a clean face and colorful dresses. I was a child like all other children. I had my own room, toys, and books. My stepfather had a car, a rarity then. I still remember it—a Nash with a running board. When he took me in his car to school, on a rainy day, I felt special. If the sun came out later, I'd walk home slowly. The earth smelled sweetly, and the fields were carpeted with wild flowers. Reaching our front door, I'd open it quietly and listen for my mother's whereabouts. I wanted to surprise her. If she was in the kitchen, mopping the floor, or talking on the phone, I would tiptoe quickly to my room, take my books and notebooks out of my bag, sit down by my desk, and do my homework for the following day. Then I'd steal behind her and cry out, "*Imma*, I already finished all my homework!" She'd pretend to be immensely surprised; we'd laugh together and sit down to eat. Life was good then. I knew that I was saved.

But the orphan was forgotten. Pardes-Hannah and the orphanage became forbidden subjects. Even years later any mention of that period was banned. A year of my life had disappeared in a conspiracy of silence. A piece of my life was wiped out—as if it had happened to somebody else. Whenever I mentioned the orphanage, I'd come up fast against my mother's wall of denial. "It was no orphanage," she would say impatiently. "It was just a school where children stayed during the day and sometimes at night. Children whose parents worked long hours, for example. The teachers were very nice. Took good care of you. I visited you every week, don't you remember? You were a happy child! Here look at this picture from Pardes-Hannah." She'd rummage in a drawer, pick up a picture of the two of us sitting on a stone ledge and shove it in my face. "You see?" she'd yell, "you are smiling! How can you say now that you were miserable? You had a very happy childhood. Your stepfather and I gave you the best. What are you blaming me for, I'd like to know? Are you doing it on purpose?" With these words, the door to my past slammed shut.

Fearing my mother's anger, I stopped asking her questions about Pardes-Hannah, and I also silenced the orphan I learned to hate. She is Haya, a wild animal, I said to myself, and I would have nothing to do with her. She does not exist. The past is dead and gone. A neutral historical fact, nothing more. It does not belong to me; it cannot claim me. How could I say to the orphan, I know you, I pity you, I will help you to get out of the orphanage, when my parents ignored her existence? How could I reach out to her when my family preferred to forget her? But she was a stubborn orphan who, for years, troubled my life. At night, especially when the coyotes were howling on the hills overlooking Yavne'el, she would appear in nightmares. During the day she disturbed my



In the orphanage at Pardes-Hannah, with my mother. I am five.



From left: Grandfather, me, my mother, Aunt Bracha, Grandmother Esther, Reuven, and Moshe, Bracha's husband. In a café on Lake Kinneret, circa 1947.

concentration. She started up fights between my parents and me and sowed discord between me and my friends. She cried, complained, and exploded in anger. She was moody and unpredictable; she almost drove me insane. She wanted recognition, but how could I give it to her? How could I do it in a society where denial of feelings is a way of life?

In his book *The Israelis*, Amos Elon points out that in Israel “one does not talk of feelings, one rarely admits that they exist.” The tendency “to shy away from feeling, as from some vast unreconnoitered enemy territory too dangerous for loquacious traveling, is a basic trait in the character of the new generation of Israelis [after the Six Day War of 1967].” Why are Israelis so hostile to introspection while Diaspora Jews have usually been skillful at it? In Israel feelings are often shunned and repressed. Do the Israelis associate introspection with weakness? Do they fear that feelings would paralyze their ability to respond to physical threats to their existence? Do they disregard personal and intimate feelings because they are inferior to the concerns of the group or the community? According to Yaron Ezrahi, the Zionist narrative, which “focused

so intently on the monumental implications of our ancient tribe's return to its land," is not concerned "with cultivating the solitary self, the lyrical personal voice of the individual." Israelis regard that personal voice a luxury or an irrelevance. And yet, as the poet Rachel admitted, "only of myself" she knew how to tell. Drawing courage from her singular example, I will set out on my own journey to find the orphan I left long ago in Pardes-Hannah.



TIVON

*Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden
 . . . and the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the
 ground. . . .*

—Genesis 2, 8

In 1951, when I was ten, we moved from Yavne'el to Tivon, an attractive summer resort 15 miles east of Haifa, and lived there for eight years. In many ways, Tivon (of nature) was to me a place of healing, the garden of my youth. However, as I later learned, in my garden, as in the ancient one, there was a seductive serpent. My mending world fractured again and suffered a deep division.

Sprawling on gentle hills overlooking Sha'ar Ha'amakim and Zebulun Valley, Tivon was an earthly paradise. Each of its streets was named after a flower or a tree. My family lived on *Ha'arakaphot* (Cyclamen Street); my best friend, Liora, lived on *Ha'shoshanim* (Rose Street); and out of my window I could gaze at winding *Alonim* (Oak Street), the street that, climbing one hill and then another, led to the house of my admired English teacher, Moses. The houses on my street and on Liora's street were surrounded by well-tended gardens. My mother was a skilled gardener, working indefatigably to dig, weed, and plant the small plots of land in front and at the back of our house. Eager irises, tulips, snapdragons, roses, pimpernels, as well as fruit trees, responded to her devoted fingers; striking long roots in thin soil, growing among rocks, they perfumed the summer air. She was rightly proud of her garden. "Isn't it like a picture? A work of art?" she would ask. Indeed, it was.

In Tivon, my stepfather's loving devotion to me also bore fruit. During my Yavne'el years, hounded by nightmares, I'd often wake up from my sleep screaming. My stepfather, Reuven, always rushed to my bed to comfort me. I'd tell him, sobbing, that there was a dark figure in the window, but he, caressing my hand, reassured me that there was no one there. Once I said that I saw

my mother in the window. Reuven laughed, "How could that be, Haya'le? Your mother is sleeping in her bed." Slowly, over several years, Reuven dispelled my nightly fears. I remember the morning after a night of uninterrupted sleep. A shaft of light was streaming in from the window, and in it were reflected the branches of the pear tree, swaying in the wind. I gazed at the dance of the luminous shapes on the floor, and thought, how sweet life is.

Tivon was peaceful. My mother was quick-tempered and moody, but nonetheless present, knitting, cooking, fixing my dresses, cleaning my face, covering my schoolbooks. My stepfather made breakfast, took me to school, helped me with math, listened to my problems, and sometimes took me to the kibbutzim to show me what the dirty work in the cowshed was like. I still remember the kibbutzniks in Yagur greeting him eagerly when he got out of his car, explaining to him, on the way to the cowshed, the symptoms of the ailing animal. Wearing dark, round sunglasses and heavy black boots, his bald head shimmering in the sun, Reuven nodded quietly. When he examined the cow, the kibbutzniks stood around him in reverent silence. He opened up his black medicine bag, took out a huge syringe, the sight of which always made me shudder slightly, filled it with white liquid from his sulfa bottle, and inserted it with quick confidence somewhere in the cow's broad back. The animal that appeared to be dying when he got there, rose quickly to its feet. The kibbutzniks thanked him profusely, as if he'd performed a miracle, but he, shy of praise, brushed them off. "It's not necessary," he said with a small ironic smile. "What did I do? Nothing, really." I was so proud of him!

Tivon was also where I met my best friend, Liora. When I first arrived, I was slow to make friends. On many occasions, I became the class scapegoat. Once, after school, the kids pushed me to the ground and danced around me, calling me names ("Wild animal! Wild animal!"). I was too afraid to fight back. When they dispersed, I got up and walked home whimpering. Nobody in class talked to me, except for one chubby girl with expressive brown eyes. Liora, like me, was the butt of her classmates' jokes. We two exiles became fast friends. We discovered that we liked the same things: reading poetry and listening to music, taking long walks in Tivon's pine forests, picking daffodils in the spring, and admiring the handsome and noble face of Zvi Harel, a cellist in the Philharmonic Orchestra.

I loved visiting Liora's home. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Cohen, originally from Bulgaria, were friendly to us and respectful of each other. Mrs. Cohen never yelled at Liora, as my mother yelled at me, yet instilled in her a cheerful sense of discipline. A year or two after our friendship had begun, how-

ever, tragedy struck. Liora's father died of a heart attack. The happy house was now submerged in gloom. Reluctantly I went to visit my friend in her gloomy house. We ate dinner in silence, and then Mrs. Cohen lit up one table lamp, which marked a solitary circle of light and plunged the rest of the room in darkness. She started reading while Liora and I whispered in the corner, perusing the play of shadows across the ceiling. I never saw Mrs. Cohen cry, but nothing could convey more poignantly the full sway of her mourning than her silence. I squirmed under the weight of that silence and wanted to leave Liora and the house. But I stayed with my friend and watched how, in the weeks and the months to come, her mother slowly conquered her grief by moving into a spacious, two-story house and starting a bustling and successful summer pension. Eventually life, movement, and laughter filled the new house.

I loved dinnertime when the pension was at its busiest hour. Liora and I would sometimes serve lemonade to the guests, but mostly we just ran around the carpet of green grass that lapped the edges of the porch where dinner was



My mother in her garden. Tivon, circa 1952

served, laughing and giggling about this or that attractive male guest, knocking down a chair or two, rushing out again to the green grass, hopping to the edge of the oak woods, peering into its gloom, and backing away from the falling night to the brightly lit kitchen, now empty of guests, where Mrs. Cohen would tell us stories about her young days in Bulgaria.

My friendship with Liora lasted through the high school years, the years of army service, and the first two years at the university. Then we separated, but when I returned from England, I rushed to see her. She was slim, married, a mother to a child, living in a small apartment in Tel Aviv. She was distant and cold, as if we had never spent those delicious summers together at the pension, never shared secrets about the cello player Harel, never run together, laughing, fearful, to the edge of the dark woods. And yet I often think of the pleasure of her friendship and remember her brave mother who taught me that even the deepest loss can be transmuted through work, laughter, and love.



RITES OF PASSAGE

When I was eleven or twelve, I came home from school one day distraught. I looked for my mother, who was out in the backyard digging around a plum tree. I dropped my backpack and rushed to her. Her sharp blue eyes stared at me, “What happened to you?” she asked, instantly reading my mood. I sat down on a rock and looked at my hands. “What?” my mother asked. “Did you get a bad grade in math?” Her eyebrows contracted in a frown.

“No,” I answered, picking up a twig.

“So what is it?” she stretched up to look at me, leaning on the hoe, her coarse gardening gloves daubed with moist soil.

“I don’t know. I can’t tell you.” I didn’t know how to start.

My mother was impatient with suspense. “Why can’t you tell me?”

“The nurse,” I whispered, digging a little hole in the ground with my twig, “visited school today. She talked to the girls.”

My mother smiled. “Did she tell you about how children are born?”

“No,” I said, disappointed at the wrong guess.

“Well, what *did* she talk to you about?”

There was no way out. I had to say the word. I whispered, “Menstruation.”

“Is that all?” my mother burst out laughing. “Why is your face so tragic? It’s not the end of the world, you know.”

“Will I be bleeding every month?” I asked in consternation.

My mother laughed again. "Yes, you will be, like all other women, until you are fifty, or so."

"But why?"

"Why, why. You always ask why. That's the way it is. You'll get used to it," she laughed.

My mother's ringing laughter stayed with me, compounding the mystery. Was that an initiation laugh, inviting me to the secrets of womanhood? Or was she laughing at my bewilderment? Was that the way Sarah laughed when the angels came to tell Abraham that she, at ninety, will bear a son? Was that the way Rachel, sitting on the "household gods" (Genesis 31:19) she had stolen, inwardly laughed at her father when he came to look for them and told him she could not get up because she had her "period"? Was that the way all women laughed when they had their monthly bleedings? Should I, too, laugh?

Somehow, though, I could not laugh. I was worried. What if I started bleeding when I was at school? What if I got up from the chair one day and there it was, a pool of blood, my dress stained with blood, and all the kids laughing and pointing at me? What if the bleeding, once started, never stopped? I could go on bleeding for the rest of my life. What then? When I confessed these fears to my mother, she laughed and laughed. But I could not stop worrying and waited in dread for the onslaught of the "curse."

How grateful I was when it came, with remarkable thoughtfulness, in the hush of the night, dropping a single stain of blood on my panties. Now nobody would know my secret. Nobody would be able to make fun of my womanhood. And yet, I knew that I was a woman, and I was ashamed.

Menstruation opened up in me the floodgates of appetite. I was always rail thin. When I came out of the orphanage, an angry and glum child, I refused to eat. For years, mealtime was a torment to my family and me. I used to stare at the food for a long hour without touching it. When my mother forced me to take a bite, I'd hold the food in my mouth, and my right cheek would swell up. When she tapped my cheek, my left cheek would swell up. Even when Aunt Ruth came for a visit and sang my favorite songs, I'd still hold the food in my mouth and push it from one cheek to the other. As a special favor to her, though, I'd swallow one bite. In those days, food was the enemy. I hated eating and remained thin. In my wildest dreams, I could not imagine myself fat, but fat I did become when I started menstruating. After all those years of fasting, I was suddenly hungry. As I began to devour bread and cookies, my mother had to reverse her exhortations: instead of urging me to eat, she had to keep me out of the kitchen. I would nevertheless sneak a

box of cookies to my room and finish it before the day was done. Once Aunt Nomi caught me in the act and cried out to my mother, "Dina, Dina, your daughter Haya has a whole box of cookies in her room!" My mother came running and snatched the cookies out of my hand. "Your fat belly does not need cookies! Why don't you look at yourself in the mirror?" she yelled. I looked. I was no longer the thin girl I used to be. I was menstruating. I was a woman and ashamed.

Although I valiantly fought my enormous appetite, I grew fatter and rounder. My mother was so fed up with my stubborn weight that she took me to a famous gynecologist in Jerusalem. She did not explain to me why she was taking me to a gynecologist for a weight problem, what kind of a doctor he was, and how he would examine me. I remember a small wiry man in a white frock; I remember his grim expression as he asked my mother questions; I remember him taking me to a white examination room; I remember his cold blue eyes looking at me through glinting glasses as he ordered me to climb on a flat surface that looked like a hospital bed; I remember him ordering me to undress and pushing my legs apart as he turned on the light; I remember the sudden incomprehensible metallic pain between my legs and the whirling questions in my mind. Why is he there? What is he doing there? Who gave him permission? What does it have to do with my weight? I remember being dressed again, feeling betrayed, walking out to meet my mother who pretended that nothing had happened, who had nothing to say to me but this, "He prescribed these pills to you. Take them for six months, and you'll lose weight." Those pills were amphetamines. I lost weight, but I was a woman and ashamed.

How could I like being a woman? From the very beginning it meant appetite and trouble. Appetite not only for food but also for sex. At thirteen I started masturbating and had some pleasure until my mother caught me. Usually I would retire to the bathroom for this, my most secret, activity. But that afternoon, for some reason, I was leisurely lolling on my mother's bed, imagining erotic scenes. I was so aroused that I pulled over myself the red silky coverlet and reached inside my pants for a release. At that very moment my mother walked into the room. She guessed what I was doing under the coverlet. She did not laugh as she did whenever I talked about menstruation. She looked stonily at me, as if she wished to strike me dead. I froze with terror.

"May I ask," she started, "why you need a cover on such a hot day?"

"I just like the silky touch of the cover," I mumbled, feeling in every fiber of my body the stupidity of my response.

“Silky shmilky. Don’t tell me stories. I know what you are doing. Don’t you ever do THAT again,” she said and walked out of the room. Both of us knew well what THAT meant.

I was a woman and ashamed.

THE SERPENT  IN THE GARDEN

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God has made.

—Genesis 3, 1

In the midst of that awakening—of appetites and hormones—my mother took me on a trip to Turkey. My stepfather’s sister, Rachel, and her husband, Reuven, moved to Istanbul for three years, where Reuven served as a diplomat in the Israeli consulate. My mother decided to visit them for two months and brought me along. Her Reuven stayed at home, tending to his cows. That was my first trip abroad; I was young and enchanted by everything I saw. To me, the city was awash with wonder, not only for its beauty but also because it was NOT Israel. Like most Israelis, who feel caged in a small country surrounded by enemy territory, I was eager to visit any place that could be marked as “abroad.”

On many mornings, my cousins Arik and Doron and I would set out early to explore the city. Arik was the leader of our small pack. He knew everything and had a charming and easy laugh that often spilled into giggles. Doron, his younger brother, was the serious student who trailed, brooding, behind us. We would start our expeditions in the plush shopping street, Para, and veer off from there through alleys to the other parts of the city. We crossed, back and forth, the Ataturk and Galata Bridges, toured the Grand Bazaar, stopped at the Hagia Sophia Church, and once even ventured over the Bosphorus Bridge to the Asiatic Uskudar area. When we lost our way we spotted the Bosphorus in the distance and regained our bearing. We were bold. We jumped on and off trams, conversed with strangers (Arik and Doron knew Turkish; I was learning), sat down at cafés by the Straits and ordered tea samovars. In the evenings we’d return home for dinner, ravenously hungry. The concierge, who lived with his family on the ground floor, would open the gates, and we’d rush into the kitchen, skipping and giggling.

I always hoped that the concierge’s son, Ikhsun, would open the gates for us. He never did, but I knew where I could see him. Every morning at six

he would exercise with his wooden bottle-shaped weights on the porch below us. I'd get dressed quickly and walk gingerly out to the veranda to catch a glimpse of him. I would lean slightly over the railing and there he would be. Aware of my presence, he would stop exercising and gaze at me until there was nothing for me to do but plunge into his green eyes and drown there. We never talked, we never touched, but in my secret heart I was an Israeli Juliet to his Turkish Romeo.

On the weekends, my family would visit the Beukada resort island, a few miles north of the straits in the Black Sea. As we got off the boat, a carriage and horses would be waiting to take us down a steep, winding road shaded with pine trees to a pristine beach covered with soft white sand. The water was smooth and supple. Only Lake Kinneret had such a silky touch, but Beukada was more exotic because it was "abroad." We used to spend a few hours on the island, and in the evening we'd catch a boat back to Istanbul.

On one of those occasions, I saw a sight that became imprinted in my memory. We were sailing back to Istanbul on a late, crowded boat. The Bosphorus Straits were darkening. As we pulled into the dock, the air was hot and humid, and all around us people were shoving and pushing. Vendors were noisily advertising their merchandise, and cabbies were offering rides. Several shabbily dressed people were sitting on the ground, along the wall, talking and smoking. Were they workers, I wondered, or beggars? My mother charged ahead. I was following her through the crowd when I stopped dead in my tracks, as if hit by a sudden force. One of the men sitting on the ground had his zipper open. He was holding his erect penis in his hand, rubbing it back and forth, right there in public, for all the world to see. Incredible, I looked again and then ran to catch up with the family, my heart pounding. I didn't tell anyone of this incident, but its repugnant impression stayed with me for months.

It was in Istanbul, the city of innocent and insidious charm, that my mother met Chaim, a married Israeli who resembled a redheaded Anthony Quinn. It was also in Istanbul that she embarked on a love affair with him that lasted seventeen years, until Reuven's death in 1972 of a massive heart attack. Chaim outlived Reuven by two years; he died in 1974 in a violent car accident.

In Istanbul, I knew nothing of my mother's affair with Chaim. They met at a party in the Israeli Consulate. It was, Chaim told me later, love at first sight. It was also an undying love, shot through with complications, counterfeits, and strange commitments and betrayals. It was the most passionate affair in my mother's life, but it was the most virulent relationship in my life, divid-