Autobiographical story 1

To Richard Billingham

There was no prospect of my finding a bridegroom at my father's house. Young men did not call on us. To find a bridegroom at my father's house would mean that my father approves of my bridegroom, that my bridegroom is a sort of friend to my father. But possible bridegrooms for me were those who shatter the parents' home, or the parents would shatter them, or their very own home, for my father was of the shattering type as well.

In our family one must always speak of before and after. Before or after my father left home in 1970, when I was eighteen (what from now on will be termed ‘The Desertion’); Before and after my sister, her husband and their two small children were killed in a car crash in 1981, (what from now on will be termed ‘The Accident’). About my mother's life it is surely possible to speak about before Auschwitz and after, but this story has no pretension to venture as far as that.

About myself as a child one can also speak of before and after the birth of my little sister, when I was ten and turned from the youngest to the middle one. My mother's late pregnancy, that brought great shame upon my fifteen years old sister, was a source of pride and joy to me, for it probably was the first thing in which we resembled others, and it also gave us entrance permission to the Health Care building and to the post-natal care service, which until then, my father, detesting red registry cards and payments on time, rejected scornfully.

Did my father consider himself a rare flower, too pretty to stand shoulder to shoulder with others, unless as sparkling and empty as himself? A rare flower with constant anger at its margins, or rather, the other way round, a flower outside and anger inside? A bad tempered flower whose flourish sinks into a pit? What was it he had to hide in the pit? No, it was not my mother and her mess that had to be hidden, but some darkness within himself, a basic stupidity that engendered his bigotry and his arrogance. Or was it his inability to share and take part in anything whatsoever, unless it was some lofty “artistic” pastime, a recitation of a dramatic poem, a piece of music by Grieg or Dvořák, or anything to do with his photography hobby?

His sister admired him but eventually married another, one absolutely united with his misery, a complete looser. And even worse, a kind of an

intellectual, a communist, whose shame in his own body and whose self-hatred became embodied in a political stance. His mother betrayed him with his sister, she went to live with her and with the communist, and served them for thirty-five years: shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing. Was it his pretty mother, who fed him with bacon behind the synagogue on Yom-Kippur in his childhood in Budapest, and who distorted his imagination with stories of her noble ancestry, was it her inner stupidity that nestled inside him? She was the one to send him away, to those relations, the mill owners in the country, to be fed after the liberation, and to find there the miller's daughter who was to become his wife. He married discontinuity itself, the lofty fragmentary facet of himself. Thence he was trapped between the oppressing stupidity of his mother inside him on the one hand, and my mother's groundlessness on the other.

My mother, whose destiny was to be determined by the flour mill to pat-a-cake eternally, I mean mainly in the twenty years after 'The Desertion', as for stupid, she was not; Mute and sharp-tongued simultaneously, blushing, melting, disappearing into her shy smile. But wait a moment, in the good old days, while my father was still around, she actually did not lack stupidity, showing off with no good reason and lacking any ability to foresee (at the same time a real fortune-teller, always knowing in advance the coming of uninvited guests), she could not plan anything beyond a scant meal.

Is my main claim against my family concerns their stupidity? It was not exactly wickedness. They were just too stupid to be able to transform themselves into wise ones. For my parents were not as narrow-minded as my aunt who was dull enough to turn her life into a relative success, but they lacked the mechanism that transforms people from stupid into wise. I mean the mechanism that separates you from yourself, and makes you become Two (pincers? Scissors?). Where from did I get hold of this mechanism, which was not to be found at home? My older sister didn't possess it as well, and perhaps that's what made it possible for her to marry at fourteen. It was a well known story in our family that I stole and hid my father's drawing compass as a young child, told time and again on Saturday breakfasts when I stayed over at my aunt's and grandmother's. Well, this split determined my becoming an artist, but when was it determined that I shall never marry? I had no choice but to become wise. I did not have, like Dorit, an idea of what I wanted, and even more so, no capacity of achieving it, I couldn't get hold of her pitchfork, neither had my father's charms with which he could attract women and somehow get

through life, nor my mother's talent to sprawl and wallow in marshy bogs and still remain immaculate, to be a pure and pinkish lump of hurt.

What I am trying to say is that my grandmother's stupidity was irreversible but my mother's was temporary and existed as long as the arrogance and the showing off, which she adopted in order to reflect my father, lasted. She had no special sympathy towards my grandmother, her mother in law. She used to ridicule her efforts to put our house in order, despising her order. Cleanliness seemed petty, inadequate, to her. She preferred baking and spreading cream upon crème, hiding the frying pans still with leftovers of egg and chocolate coating in the cupboard. She did not harbor any aversion towards mildew or sticky fats. As if her wisdom, especially after ‘The Desertion’, dwelled in Dirt, a wisdom that lashed at my face. For here I stood by my grandmother, the stupid, I so much loved her ironing. My mother was the wise one, bursting in laughter, while I was the stupid one who first and foremost wished the house to be clean and then one could chit-chat and soar to heights. But first of all it must be clean. And this cleaning mania, this identification of beauty with cleanliness, set me as stupid. I preferred stupid cloths, starched and pressed with sharp folds, to my mother's puns. I had this mania for cleanliness here below, at the inevitable basis of things, which must be stupid, in order to make it possible to start the climbing. My stupidity is my being unable to let go of the compulsory need for a stupid, normal-like, organized basis. And I do not master any talent to chirp in shit. Clean first and then chirp! This means that I lack the natural ability to chirp, for if I had it I would chirp unconditionally, but for me in order to chirp, things must be completely clean and neat.

Oops! I feel like I’m sliding and slipping into Thomas Bernhard's voice. Is it possible that Bernhard's tone befits the rhythm of my mother's humor and self-irony, while beforehand it was quite clear to me that actual wallowing in dirt had no voice? His bitterness and criticism are clearly not of my father's type, though he is an Austrian, which my father could easily be. Yet I hardly believe that Thomas Bernhard could tolerate dirt, and that there could be any way to associate his writing with sticky floors and dough-smeared faucets. Still it is possible that if he happened to know her, he would be the one to go on paying visits to my mother, when all the others had been avoiding her den long ago, if solely for providing proof of some twisted principle.

After ‘The Desertion’ she clung to her working ankle-boots and was never seen in dresses again. She became a worker with a worker's consciousness. She cried a lot and laughed as much, but there was no one

to join her in her laughter (facing the filth, I was reluctant and hardened my expression), and that's why this laughter had no effect, had no impact in the world. She laughed as if she had someone to laugh with, but she had nobody, she didn't have any company, so she ended up sobbing and yelling in her sleep like a locomotive. At first she would emit whistle-like noises of a locomotive approaching from afar, which was then followed by a yell that would wake us, the girls. Other times, we would already be awaken by the locomotive and wait in paralyzed horror to the following yell. Usually, she told us, it was a dream about someone whose face is unclear, someone invading the house, a figure you bump into. It happened for the first time just before I was about to finish high school, immediately after my father has stopped sleeping the nights at home.

And so, we, the girls, were abandoned. At an age when I already could have found a bridegroom, my father himself thought it right to leave, embarking on a new love-life.

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But I want to go back a moment, to the time before we moved from Ness-Ziona to Rishon-le-Zion, for concerning my adolescence it may be correct as well to speak of before and after; before we moved to Rishon, when I was fourteen, and after. In Ness-Ziona we lived in three houses and in Rishon we lived in three apartments, to the third one we moved when my father was not with us anymore, in the time of my matriculation exams. The last house in Ness-Ziona was the main one, because we lived there six years, which was the longest we lived anywhere. Then, before we moved to Rishon, before I was dispossessed of the garden and of the lawn (If only we have stayed there a bit longer, with the garden and the lawn, a suitor might have occurred, and though my parents were not in the habit of entertaining young men, the garden and the lawn could have been a substitute of sorts for continuity and constancy, for care) and before I got to be closely acquainted with the idea of the staircase, and was planted on the second floor above the main street, just nearby a wedding hall, we were still relatively normal.

In the mornings, between seven and eight it was the hour of familial stickiness. With the radio turned on the ‘Musical Clock’ in full volume, my mother would wake us with "Aufstehen", concentration-camps-style, and before we had a chance to open our eyes she would announce her interpretation of the news she had just been reading in the Hungarian newspaper, and the interpretation was always one and the same: "The Russians are coming!" For she, whose parents and sister were killed by

the Germans, feared only the Russians and towards the Germans she always felt a kind of familiarity mixed with awe, a fact that eventually brings her close to my father, for when he left, he chose Germany to be his new homeland.

To the eternal question: "What shall I wear?" (In Hungarian also "What shall I pick up?") she would eternally answer: "What has fallen down", that is, what I was wearing yesterday, and the day before and a week ago, for it has to be made clear that apart from a representative dress that was purchased every year in the prestigious Hoffmann shop in Tel-Aviv, my parents did not invest in cloths for the girls. She would press the shirts on my body with a lukewarm iron, and so would sew a button or a tear, inserting a piece of thread into my mouth: lest "Your lips would be stitched to one another!" And all this time her constant political prattle that would accompany my father's affairs in the toilet, and her search for the comb, for the nail scissors, for his cuff links and tie pin. In hope of finding a less stinking towel she would pull a dangling end from the closet and the whole pile would hit the floor. She cut my nails along with the skin, unable to concentrate on trifles; The Russians occupy her mind along with taming the dog to drink the cocoa remains.

In a visit last summer to the nice Charlottenburg palace in Berlin , someone made it a point to comment that while the building was in use the smells were surely unbearable, for people were taking a bath only once or twice a year then and emptying the sewage was not a trifle either. I suppose that the smells at our house in 3 Hahagana st. in Ness-Ziona, were much like those smells in Charlottenburg palace, for my father, with all his chic, could be driven to the bath only once in a winter those days, which was not so after he found himself a lover and left home, and since he married a German and is busy scrubbing his body for thirty-five long years now.

And then at quarter to eight they would start they quarrel about the daily cheque. My mother wanted money and my father wanted to give as little money as possible. He did not want the money to be spent by my mother because he wanted to spend the money himself. It was different things that they wanted to spend money on. Each of them had a field of interest on which they wished to spend money.

Her toys were kitchenware, as small as possible, because that's what she loved most, to play baby doll kitchen. Using lovely tiny shapes in the form of a star, a heart, a cloverleaf, she would cut into the flattened dough in an order known to her exclusively, then she would knead the lace-like

perforated remains again, to shape them with floury hands, to the best of her ability, into little dolls to be baked and browned and deformed in the oven.

My father preferred photography equipment and cars that certainly cost more than baking utensils. He needed money, as much as possible, and did not want it to be spent on hobbies of others. Nevertheless with her weeping in the background, he would drop a poor slice of a cheque and emerge, out of this chaos, full of charm, in his slender quite-tall body, wearing a white shirt and a tie fastened with a nickel pin, leaping the five steps to the garden and to the awaiting car, which like his office, unlike home, was clean, his domain. And she, recovering, would fold the cheque. As we leave she would disappear on her wanderings.

My father was not the type of man to lead his daughters arm in arm to their wedding ceremonial. He was one of those who enjoy their own body descending staircases with swift, light and graceful steps. His life was a constant, infinite descent from a tower whose top reaches heaven, descending and descending, toes replacing toes, without the heals touching the ground, the stairs sliding under his feet, still descending.

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It could be nice and warm to cuddle up amidst my two sisters, what was it that went wrong then? At fourteen, my sister, Dorit, was forced to choose between her father and the handsome boy she loved and was even successful in capturing. The boy was banished by my father from the rose-bush-surrounded lawn in front of our house, and not unlike in books, would still to the window of our shared room at nights, a fact that I had to keep in secret and which I could sometimes use as a bargaining card. At fourteen, in a tragic fanaticism, my sister Dorit planned the course of her entire life to the minutest detail. In her calendar, near the lists of the foreign hit parades, she glued a folded note with the names of the four children about to be born to her and to her partner after they marry when precisely twenty. She tried to imprison the handsome light-hearted boy, and this was her stupidity, for thus her heart was shut closed and all her existence was turned towards the absolute tuning of the concert of their steps. Fleet-footed, as he was, he would grasp every opportunity to leap upon mountains or be swallowed up in a dark cave, and she, being pregnant, or before, or after, would turn paralyzed. The world would disappear in her worry, all of us would become a hazy fog, and her soul like an enclosed pen would tighten up, her eyes eagerly awaiting his tall laughing figure. And so in the closed car, trapped together, they were

crushed to death along with two of their children (Michal, the eldest, who is a free soul, was merely injured). My sister's soul became a closed car, a shaky Deux-Chevaux. She preferred the enclosed pen of the car, even the danger of driving, because there, they were all protected under her supervision. When they shut themselves in the car her soul would calm down. In the small cabin, pressed against each other, swallowing distances, she entertained a hope never to arrive so as never to separate.

And these are the main things that my sister Dorit contributed to my life:

- In her first year at High-school she once returned enthusiastic and shared with me, then ten or eleven, the interpretation of the teacher to the Nathan Zach poem "... I could touch the hem of his cloak". The essence of the interpretation was summed up in the idea that the poem is an address to the father. And though "My son" is explicitly written there, this statement was like a magic clue that opened the poem completely, cracked it, and we both were left astonished.

- She taught me stanza after stanza the song of the Polish girl who implores her father not to give her away to an old man.

- She managed to give a name to a new feeling of distress that dawned upon me on a summer afternoon on the veranda when I was eight or nine. "Emptiness" she said confidently, and I felt like I was given a gift. Another time she named a friend of hers as "Empty" and I knew that she hit the point again. I also knew that the fact that I felt emptiness has not rendered me empty, these being the marvels of language.

Between my older and younger sisters, stood I, making my best to prevent the influence of the one upon the other. I wished to exert my influence. I wanted Anat on my side, in my small army: sensitive, artistic, poetical, conscious, wise, titles with which I crowned her even before her birth, a-priori. Years later she struck it into my face: "And I was expected to be grateful!" Little Anat was deserted by my father when she was eight, and more than ten years served as a close companion to my mother and as her friend in trash, a container to her unbearable sorrow and her source of comfort.

With ‘The Accident’ though, eleven years after ‘The Desertion’, to destiny's irony, my mother was somewhat relieved: this time her agony was acknowledged and old acquaintances that scorned her for being left alone, came to condole her and even brought money gifts, and money she

always loved. Both my parents loved to buy, actually, they were happy only when buying.

In my adolescence after we moved to Rishon, between the American kitchen that my mother succeeded to turn irretrievably filthy within two years of rent, and the rooms that were arranged in the common formula of contractors flats, I donned the form of a pillar of cloud. My father encountered it when he was burdened with guilt feelings about his women affairs, my mother met its deaf ears while prattling indiscriminately about money, about insults she had to take from friends, about her suspecting my father, about cake recipes. Dorit found it sour with criticism about her preferences in films, clothing and life style. Nevertheless I have accompanied her to Bat-Yam, when she was nineteen and a half, to run about the hills, where shrewd and careless contractors erected their buildings, in order to buy an apartment with the savings she collected from teaching private lessons. Accompanied and scorned.

When my father was still with us, the house was dirty indeed (occasionally, on Saturdays, he got a cleaning mania, pushing anything he could under the beds and into the closets, spitting on the living room's table and polishing it, crouching on all four in the manner of the Yemenite women, wiping the flour), but when my mother was left alone and earned her living by baking cakes, it was hard to find the house inside the dirt. You would enter the door and find yourself in an absolute outside, much more extreme than any familiar exterior, a street, an empty lot, a landscape, a field, a forest or a swamp. Outside God's providence, outside the country, abroad, even outside the laws of Nature, for here, still objects developed organic lives: pots left with food remains gave life to mushrooms and to colorful mold surfaces, cockroaches were born from the contents of drawers, myriads of tiny ones or otherwise huge ones, bigger than any common species, ants procreated in sugar heaps.

If I wished to invite a boy to my mother's house I had to obtain a tiny table and two tiny chairs and receive him on the doormat at the staircase. Through a slot in the door, my mother would thrust sliced cakes for us and would darken the whole apartment so nothing could be revealed of its contents, while the lighting of the staircase, turning constantly on and off, flooding us in intervals, would make the better of my mule's face.

On the whole it was more landscape-like than interior-like: geological strata and layers were created from a sequence of thousands of items made of different materials and in different sizes, mountains and hills of objects, small rivulets of spilled liquids, partly dried, covered the table,

the floor, the sinks, the bathtub. Stinking swamps of discarded food were standing there, stagnant.

In such a banishment and licentiousness, secret agents could come and go as they wished through the walls, mocking her existence and ours. Furniture, that my father bought in order to match meticulously into sets and ensembles, changed function, were torn apart and piled in a balcony whose shutters were broken. On the large oval parlor table, made of palisander wood, that was always ugly, the last acquisitions from department stores and the margins of markets were heaped - dishes, plastic bowls, torn towels on bargain, as well as cookbooks, pots and baking dishes with cooked food, to add a cat or two. It was so loaded that we had to put the food plates on our lap, hiding our gaze therein.
After ‘The Desertion’ no dish was tasty anymore. None of them was prepared in its accurate, original manner. A method of cooking and baking, based on substitutes, was established. On the background of this licentious life it was pointless to adhere to the rules of cooking. Each ingredient was substituted by another until the dishes could not be identified and became a kind of a red stew, perhaps eggplants, perhaps noodles. As a dessert we had cakes that were left from her round in the grocery stores, in which eggs were substituted with powder, poppy seeds with crumbs of last week's cakes, and raisins were replaced by green and red plastic-like cubes.

My mother has become a mighty dirt machine that nobody could defeat. With no effort at all, she produced layers of dirt, under which our souls were sunk and drown. With tremendous efficiency she transformed food into dirt in commercial quantities. The mill of her parents’ home had turned into a dough factory that spread and covered everything on its way. And me, not living at home anymore, and even studying art at college, was carrying along with me wherever I went, a soft medallion of filthy dough in each of my eyes. The dough was kneaded inside my head and in making art I had one superior goal - to carve myself a face.

The only one who was not touched by the dirt was she herself, pink and radiant in midst of the filth. Her soul remained innocent. Drowning her children and smiling like dew, with her golden hair and her sun freckles that speckled her bright skin.

In the years to come I was the one to develop a responsibility towards the dirt, I was entrusted to keeping and removing it in an endless toil. Is it possible, just so simply, to step out of it, be it fifteen years after her death,

and after the extinction of her whole enterprise, and start a new life, different and clean? And what about her Legacy of Dirt, her heritage?

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The pharmacy, that time and again haunts my paintings, is a layer of witchcraft in the shared head of my mother's and mine we were deprived of, a mineral not dug up. Flickering at moments but getting concealed in the concern for money, for love (in that exact order perhaps). From the pharmacy we could extract gold together, but inside her bone-marrow obstacles have sunk that could not be surmounted, as if she was living in water. The waves washed her back and forth, about to reach and then sweeping backwards. It was the water, that which she was unable to organize, the closets and the kitchen cupboards standing in water that she could not put in order. She could not materialize in the dry world. The water grew higher and above her (like the water of alcohol above my alcoholic partners). She was lovely - lovely dress and appearance - but she failed to notice she was entirely wet, for behind the lovely clothing there was nothing but tremor, no essence at all. Due to some primordial command she was stuck in the narrow strap of water near the beach. In a suicidal jump I leaped towards the land, in order to work in the pharmacy, paying with any possible ability of being natural or experiencing enjoyment. Together with her, in the water, it could be even more dangerous - a cow and a heifer floating on water. In a turn that caused me a sprain in my neck I transformed myself into a goat and insisted on holding a working tool, a hoe or a brush. The lovely swimming suit and the pearl string deceived us to believe that she could approach us, converse, but there was only an infinite prattle, reiterating, disguised as speech, drowning in the murmur of water. As if she could almost be a Mrs. Ramsey on the beach, but without the content, without the husband, without the motherhood and without herself. In her last years she used to say in bitter sobriety: "Only without myself I cannot be" but as since time began she was without herself, she could not be.

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If periods of time were marked on the body like strata in a rock, then my mother's feet would be pink like the silk ribbons tied around the starched bed linen at her parents' home in Puspok-Ladany and like the tongues of the calves in the cowshed of the gentile neighbours, where she used to accompany the maid, going to fetch milk on Sabbath evenings. From ankle to knee her legs would be black from ashes of the crematoriums.

Up to her waist she would have flesh-tint for the years of her marriage and her pregnancies and thence upwards - dough.

How she was received in Heaven – it's for angels to tell.
Translated from Hebrew by the author.