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CHEKHOV IN HEBREW

Learning to read at the far end of the world.

BY AMOS OZ

I GREW up in Jerusalem, in a tiny apartment, hardly three hundred square feet. A cubicle and another cubicle and a smaller one for a kitchen. It was dark and stuffy but full of books. Wall to wall. My father could read sixteen or seventeen languages. He could speak eleven. (All of them with a Russian accent.) My mother spoke four or five languages and read in seven or eight. They would speak Polish and Russian between themselves when they did not want me to understand. They read books in German and English for culture. They probably dreamed in Yiddish, but they taught me only Hebrew. Perhaps they feared that if I knew other languages I might be seduced by the deadly charms of Jew-hating Europe. In their inner hierarchy, farther west meant higher on the cultural scale. They regarded Tolstoy and Dostoyevski as their own but, at the same time, they probably maintained that Germany—despite Hitler—was more cultured than Poland or Russia; France more than Germany; England more than France. About America they were not so sure: shooting Red Indians and winning girls. . . . Europe remained for them a forlorn promised land of squares and belfries, bridges and cathedrals, streetcars and forests, hamlets and meadows.

Our neighborhood, Kerem Avraham, was really the end of the world, a godforsaken place. I knew about the rest of the world through my stamp collection. It was far away. Even the Land of Israel was very far away: somewhere beyond the horizon a new race was being bred of new Jews who had undergone a certain mutation—heroic Jews, pioneering, bronzed, strong, and stoic. Diametrically opposed to the traditional Jew of the Diaspora. Brave young men and women who had turned the dark night into an intimate friend; young men and women who had advanced past all inhibitions between him and her, past all restraint.

They lived in Galilee, in the valleys, far away. Sometimes I would go with the other children to watch them unload their produce at the wholesale fruit-and-vegetable market. We would breathe deeply, intoxicated with the aroma of their different world. They came to us from the dark side of the moon, a splendiferous place where important things occurred, where they struggled to build a new nation.

ON the dark side of the moon, there was also a city called Tel Aviv, a fascinating place of which I knew very little. But I did know that the newspapers were printed there, and the theatres were there, and new forms of art and many political parties and stormy debates and, above all, great Jewish athletes. And the sea filled with suntanned, muscular Jews who knew how to swim. Swimming was unthinkable in Jerusalem. It required different genes.

How far away Tel Aviv was! Throughout my childhood, I visited the city only five or six times. We would go to spend the Passover holiday with my mother's sisters and their families. In Tel Aviv everyone walked differently; they walked the way the astronauts trod on the moon. Every step was a leap of twenty feet, because gravity in Tel Aviv, in those years, was weaker than in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem you would first test the ground with the tip of your sandal; when you finally set your foot down, you would not be very quick to move it again. After two thousand years of exile, when finally setting foot in Jerusalem you had better not relinquish your foothold too hastily lest someone else take it away. And if you moved your foot you would not be too quick to put it on the ground again. God knows what enemies lie in wait underneath. Haven't we paid dearly so many times in the past for being too trusting, for not taking adequate precautions? That is how people walked in Jerusalem. In Tel Aviv, by contrast, the whole city was a grasshopper.

We used to speak of Tel Aviv with a mixture of envy, condescension, and admiration, and also with a certain undertone of conspiracy, as if Tel Aviv were a secret project of the Jewish people and we

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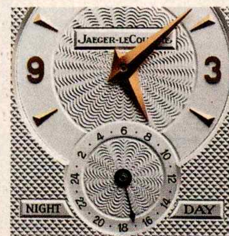

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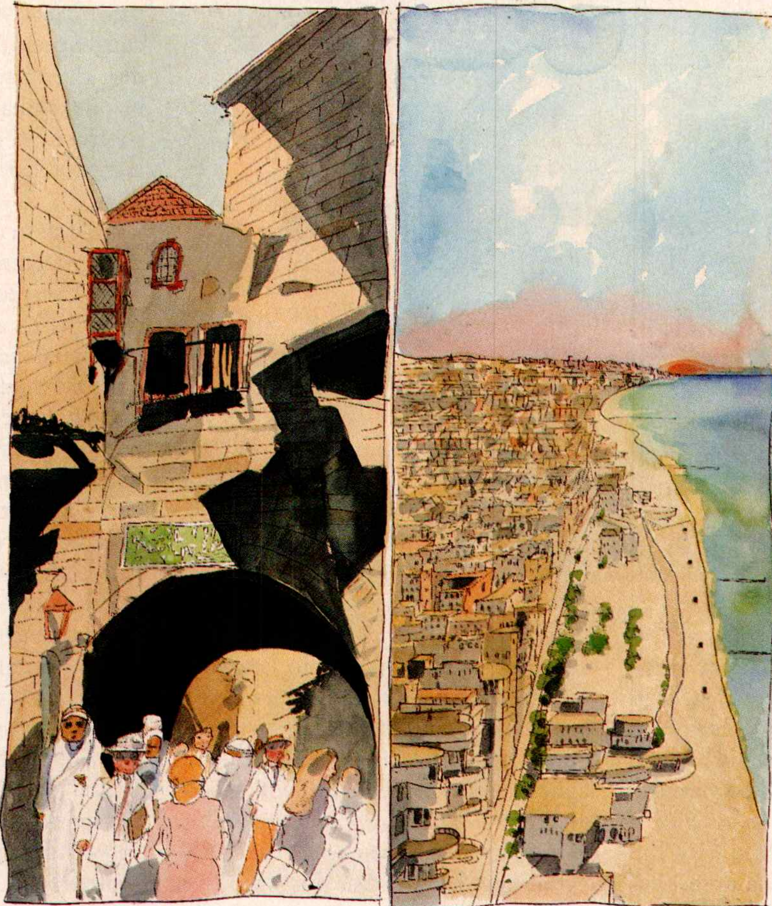
had to bear in mind that the enemy might be listening. A brand-new city springs out and spreads: Tel Aviv. Going to Tel Aviv was an expedition. Even telephone contact was a complex undertaking. We used to telephone the family in Tel Aviv once every three months or so, even though we had no telephone at home and neither had my aunts. (It was 1943 or 1944, and I was four or five years old.) First, a letter would be dispatched to Aunt Chaya and Uncle Zvi, indicating that "on the nineteenth, which is a Wednesday since we know that on Wednesdays Zvi finishes work early, we will call you at the corner pharmacy at five o'clock. Please expect our call." The letter would be sent way ahead of time, and then we would sit and wait for the reply, which would finally arrive: "Wednesday, the nineteenth, is fine. We shall be there and expect your call at five o'clock. Don't worry if your call is slightly later—we will wait."

I no longer remember whether we would put on our best clothes for the excursion to our neighborhood pharmacy, from which we would place the phone call, but I would not be surprised if we had done so. There was something very festive about all this. On Monday, my father would say to my mother, "You haven't forgotten, Fania, have you? This week we are going to phone Tel Aviv." On Tuesday morning, my mother would say to my father, "Aryeh, don't be late on Wednesday so there won't be a slipup." And he would nswer, "Me? Late?" And the two of em would turn to me: "Amos, don't ake any trouble. Don't catch a cold and n't fall down before Wednesday." On last evening: "We want you to go to early so that tomorrow on the phone will be chipper. We don't want them nk you're not getting enough to eat." e lived on Amos Street. The phar- as around the corner, on Zephania At three o'clock, my father would say to my mother, "Don't you start anything new now, so you won't be pressured for time."

"I'll be all right. But you—don't you go losing yourself in your books now."

"I'm keeping an eye on my watch and Amos will remind me."

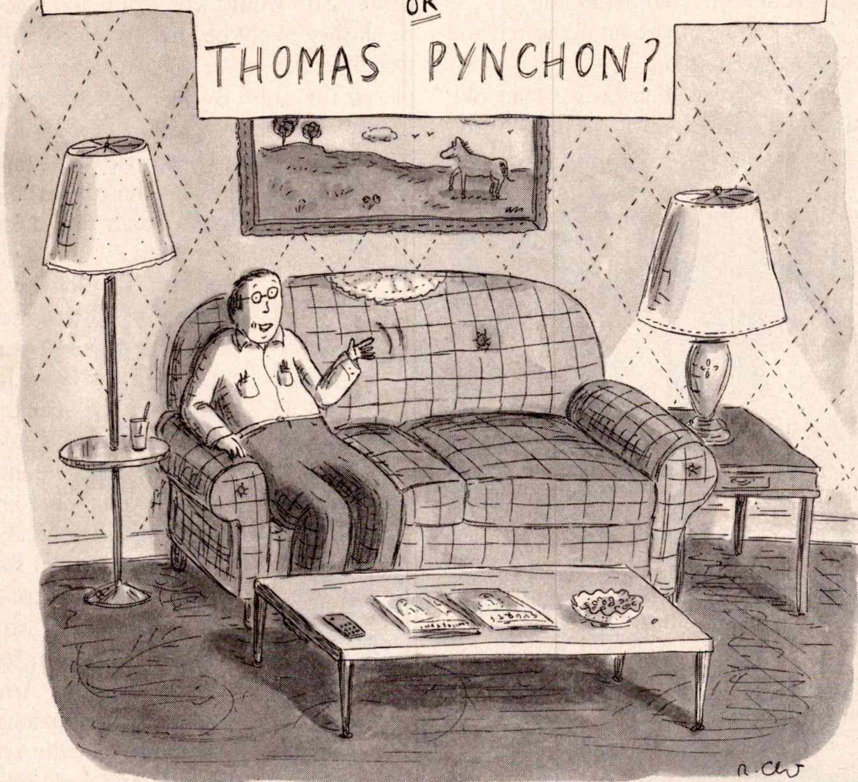
So there I was, four or five years old, burdened with historic responsibility. Again and again, I would dash to the kitchen clock and I would decree: twenty-five minutes to go, twenty minutes to go, fifteen minutes to go. And, at that, we would set out for the pharmacy. Upon arriving, we would greet the pharmacist, "Good afternoon, Mr. Heinemann, how are you? We have come to make a phone call to Tel Aviv." He had, of course, been given advance warning. He knew all along that we would come on Wednesday, but we saw fit to remind him. Mr. Heinemann would reply gravely, "Yes, yes, I know. Please take a seat." Then my father would state, "I shall call now." Mother would ask, "Isn't it a bit early? It's still a few minutes ahead of time." He would say, "Actually, it takes some time to get through." (There was no direct dialling at the time.) Mother would appeal, "But what if you do get through right away and they are not yet there?" Father would argue, "In that case, we will try one more time." She would say, "But don't you think they might be anxious in case they walk in and discover that we have already placed the call?" By the time this argument was over, it would be almost five o'clock. My father would rise to his feet, pick up the phone, and say, "Madam, would you be so kind as to connect me with Tel Aviv six-four-eight." (Or something like this—it was a three-digit world.) Sometimes the operator would respond, "Would you please hold the line and wait your turn, sir? I'm afraid this may take a few minutes as, at the moment, the Postmaster General is using the line," or Mr. Siton, or Mr. Nashashibi. And we would grow anxious.



We lived in Jerusalem; heroic Jews lived in Tel Aviv. That was real life.

I could virtually see this one and only line connecting Jerusalem with the exchange in Tel Aviv and, through it, with the rest of the world. And here this line is busy, and as long as it's busy Jerusalem is cut off. I could envision this line winding its way over the hills and between the mountains. I thought of it as a miracle. But what if wild beasts were to attack and gnaw the line at night? Or some bad Arabs were to cut it with their knives? Or there were a brushfire? God knows, a thin vulnerable line was stretched out there, roasting in the sun. Anything could happen.

Eventually, Father would assume that the Postmaster General or Mr. Nashashibi had completed his call and he would say, "Excuse me, Operator. I did ask you, if I'm not mistaken, to connect me with Tel Aviv six-four-eight." She would say, "Yes, sir, your request has been duly noted. Please await your turn." Father would comment, "Of course, Madam, I will certainly await my turn, but there are people waiting at the other end as well." Thus he would politely imply that al-



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though we were people of culture there were limits to restraint. We are civilized people, but we are nobody's fool. We are not sheep to be led to the slaughter. Gone are the days when one could do with the Jews as one wished. That time has ended. At last, the telephone would ring in the Tel Aviv pharmacy and the conversation would go roughly as follows:

"Hello, Zvi?"

"Speaking."

"This is Aryeh calling from Jerusalem."

"Hello, Aryeh. This is Zvi. How are you all? Everything is fine at this end. We are talking to you from the pharmacy."

"Same here. What's new?"

"Nothing special."

"How are things going, Zvi?"

"There's nothing new in particular. How are things with you?"

"Fine. No news here."

"No news is good news. Is everything really going well up there?"

"Yes, indeed, everything is excellent. And now Fania wants to speak to you."

And then the same thing all over again. What's going on. What's new. And now Amos will speak with you. And that was it: How are you? Very well. We'll talk again soon. It's good to hear your voice. Yes, it's good to hear you, too. We shall write you a letter and determine a time for our next call. We will speak again soon. Yes, we definitely will. Soon. Good-bye. Take good care of yourselves. All the best to you. And to you.

But now I know that this was not at all funny. Life was hanging by a thread. Today I understand that they were not at all sure whether they would ever speak again. God knows what was about to happen. Violence, a pogrom, a massacre, a war, a catastrophe. Hitler's tanks had been advancing in North Africa and in the Caucasus, reaching almost to our doorsteps from two directions, so that what sounded like empty small talk over the phone was not at all empty. It was just sparse. As these telephone conversations come back to me, I realize how hard it was for them—not just for my parents but for all of them—to express personal feelings. Public sentiment was no problem. They were highly emotional people. They could passionately argue about Bakunin or about Trotsky. They could reach the verge of tears debating colonialism, or exploitation, or anti-Semitism, but when they wanted to convey a personal emotion they were struck dumb. There was something arid and clenched, even terrified, the heritage of many generations of suppression: the bourgeois European codes of restraint reinforced the small-town religious Jewish inhibitions. Almost everything was considered improper. Besides, there was an acute shortage of words. Hebrew was not their natural language, nor was it, in those years, a language for intimacy. You couldn't really control the precise tone and shade of what you were saying. Even people like my parents, who had a command of Hebrew, had no real control of it. It probably felt like driving an unfamiliar vehicle in a strange city.

ALL sets of codes were upset in that immigrant world. There were no "locals." Everybody was more or less a new immigrant from somewhere. Everybody feared sounding ridiculous, and at the same time everybody occasionally ridiculed others. My father was a man of letters, in a necktie and a cheap jacket, a librarian, a man of moderately conservative right-wing views. Each time he confronted a world reformer, a revolutionary theorist-cum-laborer, he was in total disarray. He knew exactly how to conduct a conversation with such a counterpart back in Warsaw or Vilna, where one knew one's place yet chose to sound democratic and uncondescending. Here in Jerusalem, everything was different; not upside down, as in Communist Russia, just different. On the one hand, Father was middle-class while his partner in conversation was a self-proclaimed proletarian. On the other hand, this proletarian was a pioneer, a hero, the new salt of the earth, whereas my bookish father knew, in his heart of hearts, that he was a bit of a deserter from the front lines of those building this new homeland.

Most of the neighbors were lower-middle-class—clerks, shopkeepers, schoolteachers, dentists—and nearly all of them sworn writers of letters to the editor. They were no longer synagogue-goers, but they did light Sabbath candles, just to be on the safe side, or perhaps in order to retain some sense of Jewish familiarity. Great talkers they were, and yet they maintained that the time had come for the Jewish people to drop the realm of words and to set about *doing*. On this topic, they were fine orators. Where should the Zionist enterprise go from here? What ought we to be saying, loud and clear, to the British government? How can we liberate

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the working class here, and everywhere? Everybody would come on Saturday afternoon to our tiny garden for a glass of Russian tea, talking passionately while listening to others distractedly.

THE novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevski were discussed incessantly, but years later, when I first read Chekhov's stories in Hebrew translation, I was convinced that he was one of us. I remember the way, even as my parents' friends talked about the impending new world order, their fingers would play with the brims of their hats, and the terrible embarrassment that made them blush whenever my mother bent forward a bit to serve the cookies, revealing a hint of her modest décolletage. Oh, their fingers! They looked as if they were trying to swallow one another. All of this has been immortalized by Chekhov.

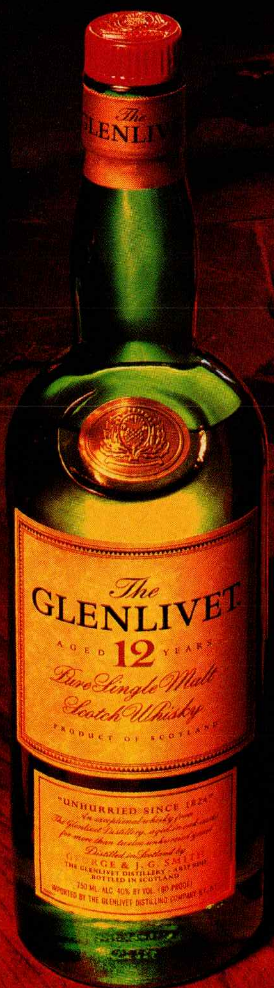
Chekhov also captured our sense of provincialism: Somewhere else in the world there is real life. Never here. Real life is pre-Hitler Europe, vibrating with *kultura*, where the lights are on every evening and the ladies are wrapped in furs and the gentlemen bend to kiss their hands and together they go out to the opera house or the ballet, or go to pass an evening in golden places with chandeliers radiating with hundreds of tiny lights. That is where life pulsates. That is where the magnificent artists create the masterpieces, falling violently in love with unique ladies.

Remote echoes would wind their way to Kerem Avraham about the mistress of a great artist who had fallen in love with another great artist, always ending in glorious tragedy. Not that I had the faintest idea what mistresses were. There were no mistresses in Jerusalem. There were women, lady friends. There were life partners. There were even "affairs." People said, very reluctantly, that "something is going on between Lubiansky and Nakdimon's lady friend." I realized that the expression "something is going on" was loaded with a dark secret. But a mistress? That was Biblical. In the whole of Jerusalem, there was not, nor could there be, a mistress. Maybe there were one or two in Tel Aviv, I thought; there were all sorts of wonders in Tel Aviv.

In our parts, people lived reluctantly. Everybody, not just my parents, made cautious calculations. You went to Mr. Auster's grocery store and you had to make a choice between Arab-village cheese and kibbutz cheese. Arab cheese was a little bit cheaper than kibbutz cheese. It was categorical that we bought only local, not imported, products, but could Arab-village cheese be regarded as a local product? If you buy Arab cheese, you betray Zionism. Somewhere in the mountains of Galilee or the Negev wilderness, a kibbutz girl with tears of proud poverty has wrapped this cheese for you. You must buy this Zionist cheese. On the other hand, if you boycott the product of the Arab villages will you not eternalize the hatred between the communities? Those simple, pure-hearted Arab fellahin are, after all, the local incarnation of Tolstoy's muzhik. Are you really going to punish poor Arab villagers just because their Arab landlords are Jew-haters? Just because the British are inciting them against us? No. Therefore you must buy Arab cheese. And yet God knows what the hygienic conditions really are in those village dairies. They may be swarming with microbes. Microbes were one of our biggest horrors. They were like anti-Semitism: nobody actually saw them but everybody sensed them lurking everywhere. So in the grocery shop a little argument would develop among the customers. On the one hand, "There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you" (Exodus 12:49), and therefore we have to buy Arab cheese. On the other hand, "The poor of thine own city come first," and therefore we must buy kibbutz cheese. But then what would Tolstoy say about him who selects cheese on the basis of religion or origin? What about love of humanity? What about universalism? Yet aren't you ashamed to prefer Arab cheese to kibbutz cheese just because it is cheaper by a penny? Shame on you! Actually, shame on you either way. Life was full of such shameful choices.

I STARTED reading, almost on my own, when I was still very young. What else was there to do? The nights were much longer then. The electric light was poor, interrupted by long power failures. Half the time there was a curfew, imposed by the British, so we had to be indoors from sunset on. Very often we lived by candlelight or kerosene lamp. Even when the electricity had not failed, we used it sparingly. My parents would always install weak light bulbs, not so much because of the cost but because bright light was wasteful and waste was immoral. There was always the underprivileged half of the world out there to be considered, the starving children in In-

He didn't have a snowball's chance of resisting it.



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dia, on account of whom I had to finish everything on my plate. And so my father would replace a sixty-watt bulb with a forty-watt bulb. Besides, those pioneers in remote kibbutzim had to write their poetry and ideological treatises by candlelight. How, then, could he permit himself a sixty-watt bulb?

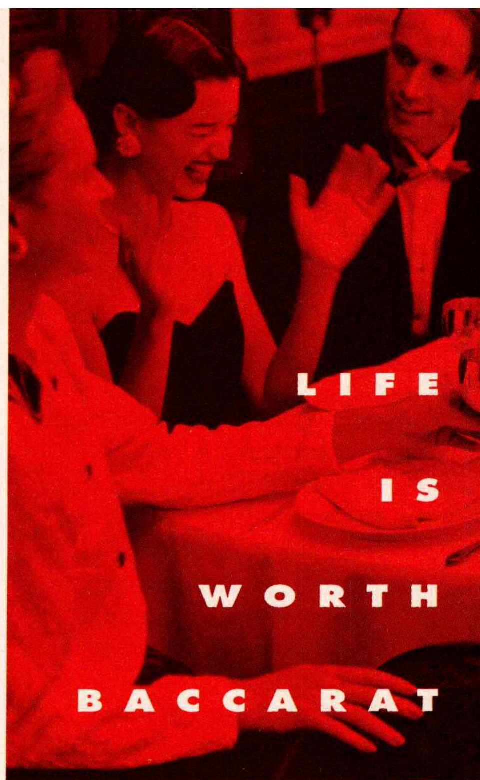
Books, however, were plentiful. My father was an addict, a compulsive collector of books. After all, human beings come and go, while books remain forever. He was extremely sensual about books. He liked to touch them, feel them, fondle them, and sniff them. He was a book maniac. In fact, in those days each book had an individual flavor. Father simply couldn't keep his hands to himself; he would immediately reach out, even for other people's books. Many books had a cloth binding, which sometimes parted from the spine in a seductive manner, creating an opening, a gap between cloth and cardboard. One could peek in and get an eyeful of the musky darkness.

Occasionally, there was no money to buy food for the Sabbath. My mother would look at my father. He would look at the bookshelves (which held several thousand books), and I knew it was time to select the lambs for the sacrifice. I could see the pain in his eyes, but he was an ethical man. He knew food was more urgent than books, and that the good of the child must come first. I remember his back at the door, half a dozen precious books under his right arm, and I knew this must be the shape of Abraham's back as he left his tent, carrying the unknowing Isaac, and set out for Mt. Moriah. These were leather-bound books with gilt-embossed titles, brought here from Warsaw or from Vilna. Normally, he would come back an hour or two later, devoid of books, carrying paper bags with bread and milk and eggs and, occasionally, tinned beef. But sometimes he came back smiling happily, looking as if he had just won the lottery, carrying neither food nor his beloved books: he had sold the books, but he bought others instead, because in the secondhand bookstore he had uncovered such irresistible treasures that he couldn't help himself—they were once-in-a-lifetime discoveries.

I WAS about six or seven years old when the first great day in my life occurred. My father cleared part of one of the lowest shelves in his library for my use. To be precise, he bequeathed me ten inches of space. I was allowed to bring my own books, which until then had been piled on the night table next to my bed, and to arrange them upright on the shelf with their backs turned to the world. This was no less than a rite of initiation: a boy who stands his books erect is no longer a child but a man. From that moment, I was like my father. My books could stand. My books were erect.

Alas, I made a dreadful mistake. Father went to work and I was free to do whatever I wanted, but I had a very childish idea of how these things really ought to be done. I arranged my books by height, including books that were beneath my dignity, nursery books from babyhood. I didn't want to exclude them, because I wanted to fill completely the space allocated to me. I was still euphoric, celebrating my triumph, when my father returned from work, cast one disgusted glance at my books, and turned to me with a long silent look that I will never forget. It was a look of disappointment and contempt, if not complete genetic despair. Finally, he hissed from between clenched teeth, "By height? Do you think books are soldiers? Do you think this is an honor guard? A military parade?" There was another long silence, after which he told me the facts of life, educating me about the innermost secrets of libraries. He opened up to me a dazzling view of the varieties of order: books could be arranged by topics, by titles, by chronology, by alphabetical order of the authors, by publishing house, and so on. That's when I learned that life is full of different avenues. That anything could be arranged by very different principles. That there are many different coherent logics in the world. I spent hours on end arranging and rearranging my twenty-five or thirty volumes. That's how books taught me the art of composition—not their contents but their physical being. That's how books taught me about intoxicating twilight zones between the legitimate and the illegitimate. This lesson I cherish for life. When my time came to discover love, I was not a complete novice. I already knew that there were different ways, different possibilities, different avenues. ♦

(*Translated, from the Hebrew, by Amos Oz and Maggie Bartura.*)



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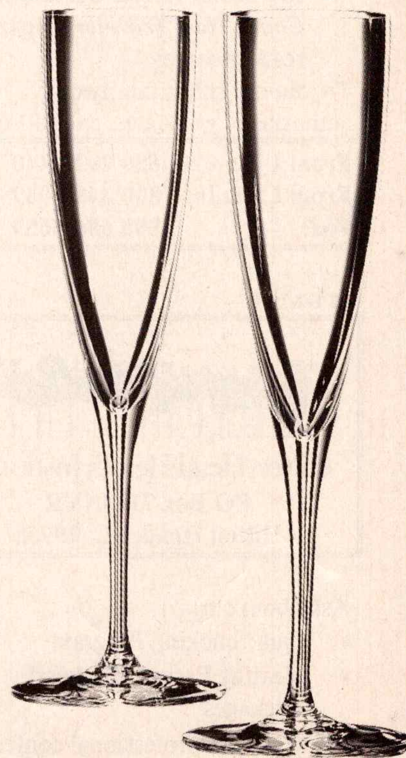

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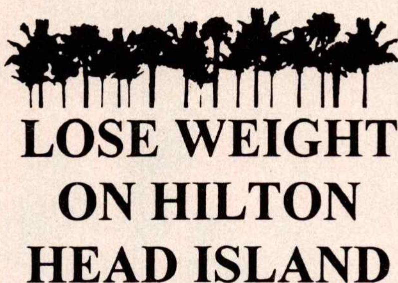

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FICTION

PHILOMENA

BY JAY McINERNEY

THE name of the party is the Party You Have Been to Six Hundred Times Already. Everybody is here. "All your friends," my girlfriend Philomena states in what can only be described as a tart—positively citric—manner. It seems to me that they are *her* friends, that *she* is the reason we are part of this fabulous gala, which takes place in the waiting room of Grand Central, evicting dozens of homeless people for the night. We're supposedly on hand for the benefit of a disease, but we were comped, and so was everyone else we know. "I'm sick of all this pointless glamour," my glamorous girlfriend says. "I want the simple life." This has become a theme. Weariness with metropolitan life in all its colonoscopic intricacy. I wonder if her ennui is somehow related to that other unstated domestic theme: infrequency of sex.

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME

We are accosted by Belinda, the popular transvestite, who I am nearly certain is a friend of my girlfriend's, as opposed to a friend of mine. Belinda is with an actual woman, an ageless one with striking dark eyebrows and buzz-cut white hair, who is always here at the party, and whom I always seem to recognize, and whose name is Hi Howareyou Goodtoseeyou. All the women lately have either three names or just one. Even the impersonators. "Oh, God, hide me," says the woman whose name I always forget. "There's Tommy Kroger. I had a bad date with him about five thousand years ago."

"Did you sleep with him?" Philomena asks, raising one of her perfectly defined eyebrows, which looks like a crow in flight in the far distance of a painting by van Gogh.

"God, I can't remember."

"If you can't remember—then you did," says Belinda. "That's the rule."

Ah, so *that's* the rule.

Later, as we are undressing for bed, Philomena announces preëmptively that she is exhausted.

No nookie for you, buckaroo.

AT LONG LAST, SEX

THE narrator, the day after the party, is helping Philomena choose the outfits for her trip—a versatile taupe suit from Jil Sander, a Versace jacket and ripped jeans for the plane, a fetching little sheath from Nicole Miller for evening, plus an extra pair of ripped and faded jeans, plus three immaculate white T-shirts. If he were more attentive, the narrator might pick up certain clues from the packing, or from her behavior, that this trip is more than it has been represented to be, but he is not suspicious by nature and his powers of observation are swamped by a surge of hormones. When, after trying on the sheath, she slips out of it and asks him to fetch some panties from her dainties drawer, he is overcome with desire for the taut, tawny flesh beneath her teddy. "Please," he pleads. "Just a little slice." He