

A Horse Walks into a Bar: A novel

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****WINNER OF THE 2017 MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL PRIZE****

The award-winning and internationally acclaimed author of the *To the End of the Land* now gives us a searing short novel about the life of a stand-up comic, as revealed in the course of one evening's performance. In the dance between comic and audience, with barbs flying back and forth, a deeper story begins to take shape—one that will alter the lives of many of those in attendance.

In a little dive in a small Israeli city, Dov Greenstein, a comedian a bit past his prime, is doing a night of stand-up. In the audience is a district court justice, Avishai Lazar, whom Dov knew as a boy, along with a few others who remember Dov as an awkward, scrawny kid who walked on his hands to confound the neighborhood bullies. Gradually, as it teeters between hilarity and hysteria, Dov's patter becomes a kind of memoir, taking us back into the terrors of his childhood: we meet his beautiful flower of a mother, a Holocaust survivor in need of constant monitoring, and his punishing father, a striver who had little understanding of his creative son. Finally, recalling his week at a military camp for youth—where Lazar witnessed what would become the central event of Dov's childhood—Dov describes the indescribable while Lazar wrestles with his own part in the comedian's story of loss and survival.

Continuing his investigations into how people confront life's capricious battering, and how art may blossom from it, Grossman delivers a stunning performance in this memorable one-night engagement (jokes in questionable taste included).

DAVID GROSSMAN was born in Jerusalem. He is the author of numerous works of fiction, nonfiction, and children's literature. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and has been translated into more than forty languages. He is the recipient of many prizes, including the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, the Buxtehuder Bulle in Germany, Rome's Premio per la Pace e l'Azione Umanitaria, the Premio Ischia—international award for journalism, Israel's Emet Prize, and the Albatross Prize given by the Günter Grass Foundation.

JESSICA COHEN was born in England, raised in Israel, and now lives in the United States. She has translated contemporary Israeli fiction, nonfiction and other creative works, including David Grossman's *To the End of the Land*.

Good evening! good evening! Good evening to the majestic city of Ceasariyaaaaaah!"

The stage is empty. The thundering shout echoes from the wings. The audience slowly quiets down and grins expectantly. A short, slight, bespectacled man lurches onto the stage from a side door as if he'd been kicked through it. He takes a few faltering steps, trips, brakes himself on the wood floor with both hands, then sharply juts his rear end straight up. Scattered laughter and applause from the audience. People are still filing into the club, chatting loudly. "Ladies and gentlemen!" announces a tight-lipped man standing at the lighting console. "Put your hands together for Dovaleh G!" The man onstage still crouches like a monkey, his big glasses askew on his nose. He slowly turns to face the room and scans it with a long, unblinking look.

"Oh, wait a minute," he grumbles, "this isn't Caesarea, is it?" Sounds of laughter. He slowly straightens up and dusts his hands off. "Looks like my agent fucked me again." A few audience members call out, and he stares at them in horror: "Say what? Come again? You, table seven, yeah, with the new lips--they look great, by the way." The woman giggles and covers her mouth with one hand. The performer stands at the edge of the stage, swaying back and forth slightly. "Get serious now, honey, did you really say Netanya?" His eyes widen, almost filling the lenses of his glasses: "Let me get this straight. Are you going to sit there and declare, so help you God, that I am actually for real in Netanya at this very minute, and I'm not even wearing a flak jacket?" He crosses his hands over his crotch in terror. The crowd roars with joy. A few people whistle. Some more couples amble in, followed by a rowdy group of young men who look like soldiers on furlough. The small club fills up. Acquaintances wave to one another. Three waitresses in short shorts and neon--purple tank tops emerge from the kitchen and scatter among the tables.

"Listen, Lips"--he smiles at the woman at table seven--"we're not done yet. Let's talk about it. I mean, you look like a pretty serious young lady, I gotta say, and you certainly have an original fashion sense, if I'm correctly reading the fascinating hairdo that must have been done by--let me guess: the designer who gave us the Temple Mount mosque and the nuclear reactor in Dimona?" Laughter in the audience. "And if I'm not mistaken, I detect the faint whiff of a shitload of money emanating from your direction. Am I right or am I right? Heh? Eau de one percent? No? Not at all? I'm asking because I also note a magnificent dose of Botox, not to mention an out--of--control breast reduction. If you ask me, that surgeon should have his hands cut off."

The woman crosses her arms over her body, hides her face, and lets out shrieks of delight through her fingers. As he talks, the man strides quickly from one side of the stage to the other, rubbing his hands together and scanning the crowd. He wears platform cowboy boots, and as he moves the heels make a dry tapping sound. "What I'm trying to understand, honey," he yells without looking at her, "is how an intelligent lady like yourself doesn't realize that this is the kind of thing you have to tell someone carefully, judiciously, considerately. You don't just slam someone with 'You're in Netanya.' Bam! What's the matter with you? You gotta give a guy some preparation, especially when he's so skinny." He lifts up his faded T--shirt and a gasp passes through the room. "Ain't it so?" He turns his bare chest to the people sitting on either side of the stage and flashes a big grin. "See this? Skin and bones. Mostly cartilage. I swear to God, if I was a horse I'd be glue by now, you know what I'm saying?" Embarrassed giggles and repulsed exhalations in response. "All I'm saying, sister," he turns back to the woman, "is next time, when you give someone this kind of news, you need to do it carefully. Anesthetize him first. Numb him up, for God's sake. You gently numb his earlobe, like this: Congratulations, Dovaleh, O handsomest of men, you've won! You've been chosen to take part in a special experiment on the coastal plain,

nothing too long, ninety minutes, at most two hours, which has been determined to be the maximum permissible time for nonhazardous exposure to this location for the average person."

The audience laughs and the man is surprised. "Why are you dumbasses laughing? That joke was about you!" They laugh even harder. "Wait a minute, just so we're clear, did they already tell you you're just the opening audience, before we bring in the real one?" Whistles, snorts of laughter, a few boos from some parts of the room, a couple of fists thumping on tables, but most of the crowd is amused. A tall, slender couple comes in, both with soft golden locks falling over their foreheads. They're a young boy and girl, or maybe two boys, clad in shiny black, with motorcycle helmets under their arms. The man onstage glances at them and a little wrinkle arches above his eye.

He moves constantly. Every few minutes he launches a quick punch into the air, then dodges his invisible opponent, deceptive and swift like a skilled boxer. The audience loves it. He tents his hand over his eyes and scans the darkened room.

I'm the one he's looking for.

"Between you and me, pals, I should be putting my hand to my heart now and assuring you that I'm crazy--I mean crazy!--about Netanya, right?" "Right!" a few young audience members shout. "I should be explaining how I'm just so into being here with you on a Thursday evening in your charming industrial zone, and not just that but in a basement, practically touching the magnificent radon deposits while I pull a string of jokes out of my ass for your listening pleasure--correct?" "Correct!" the audience yells back. "Incorrect," the man asserts and rubs his hands together gleefully. "It's all a crock, except the ass bit, because I gotta be honest with you, I can't stand your city. I get creeped out by this Netanya dump. Every other person on the street looks like he's in the witness protection program, and every other other person has the first person rolled up in a black plastic bag inside the trunk of his car. And believe me, if I didn't have to pay alimony to three lovely women and child support for one--two--three--four--five kids--count 'em: five--I swear to God, standing before you tonight is the first man in history to get postpartum depression. Five times! Actually four, 'cause two of them were twins. Actually five, if you count the bout of depression after my birth. But that whole mess ended up being a good thing for you, my darling Netanya, because if not for my milk--teethed little vampires, there is no way--none!--I'd be here tonight for the measly seven hundred fifty shekels Yoav pays me with no expenses and no gratitude. So let's get going, my friends, my dearly beloveds, let's party tonight! Raise the roof! Put your hands together for Queen Netanya!"

The audience applauds, slightly befuddled by the reversal, but swept up nonetheless by the hearty roar and the sweet smile that lights up his face and completely transforms it. Gone is the tormented, mocking bitterness, replaced as if by a camera flash with the visage of a soft--spoken, refined intellectual, a man who couldn't possibly have anything to do with the utterances that just spewed out of his mouth.

He clearly enjoys the confusion he sows. He turns around slowly on the axis of one foot like a compass, and when he completes the rotation his face is twisted and bitter again: "I have an exciting announcement, Netanya. You won't believe your luck, but today, August twentieth, happens to be my birthday. Thank you, thank you, you're too kind." He bows modestly. "Yes, that's right, fifty--seven years ago today the world became a slightly worse place to live in. Thank you, sweethearts." He prances across the stage and cools his face with an imaginary fan. "That's nice of you, really, you shouldn't have, it's too much, drop the checks in the box on your way out, cash you can stick to my chest after the show, and if you brought sex coupons you can come up right now."

Some people raise their glasses to him. A few couples enter noisily--the men clap as they walk--and sit down at a group of tables near the bar. They wave hello at him, and the women call out his name. He squints and waves back in a vague, nearsighted way. Over and over again he turns to look at my table in the back of the room. From the minute he got onstage he's been seeking my eyes. But I can't look straight at him. I dislike the air in here. I dislike the air he breathes.

"Any of you over fifty--seven?" A few hands go up. He surveys them and nods in awe. "I'm impressed, Netanya! That's some bitchin' life span you got yourselves here! I mean, it's no easy feat to reach that age in a place like this, is it? Yoav, put the spotlight on the crowd so we can see. Lady, I said fifty--seven, not seventy--five . . . Wait up, guys, one at a time, there's enough Dovaleh to go around. Yes, table four, what did you say? You're turning fifty--seven, too? Fifty--eight? Amazing! Deep! Ahead of your time! And when is that happening, did you say? Tomorrow? Happy birthday! What's your name, sir? What's that? Come again? Yor--Yorai? Are you kidding me? Shit, man, your parents really shafted you, eh?"

The man named Yorai laughs heartily. His plump wife leans on him, caressing his bald head.

"The lady next to you, dude, the one marking her territory on you--is that Mrs. Yorai? Be strong, my brother. I mean, you were probably hoping 'Yorai' was the last blow, right? You were only three when you realized what your parents had done to you"--he walks slowly along the stage, playing an invisible violin--"sitting all alone in the corner of the nursery, munching on the raw onion Mom put in your lunch box, watching the other kids play together, and you told yourself: Buck up, Yorai, lightning doesn't strike twice. Surprise! It did strike twice! Good evening to you, Mrs. Yorai! Tell me, honey, might you be interested in letting us in, just between friends, on what mischievous surprise you're preparing for your husband's special day? I mean, I look at you and I know exactly what's going through your mind right now: "Because it's your birthday, Yorai darling, I'll say yes tonight, but don't you dare do to me what you tried on July 10, 1986!" The audience falls about, including the lady, who is convulsed, her face contorted with laughter. "Now tell me, Mrs. Yorai"--he lowers his voice to a whisper--"just between you and me, do you really think your necklaces and chains can hide all those chins? No, seriously, does it seem fair to you, in these days of national austerity, when plenty of young couples in Israel have to make do with one chin"--he strokes his own receding chin, which at times gives him the appearance of a frightened rodent--"and you're just coasting along happily with two--no, wait: three! Lady, the skin of that goiter alone is enough for a whole new row of tents down at Occupy Tel Aviv!"

A few scattered laughs. The lady's grin is stretched thin over her teeth.

"And by the way, Netanyahu, since we're on the topic of my theory of economics, I would like to note at this point and for the avoidance of doubt that I am all for a comprehensive reform of the capital market." He stops, breathless, puts his hands on his hips, and snorts. "I'm a genius, I'm telling you, words come out of my mouth that even I don't understand. Listen up, I've been convinced for at least the past ten minutes that taxation should be calculated solely according to the payer's weight-- a flesh tax!" Another glance in my direction, a lingering look, almost alarmed, trying to extricate from within me the gaunt boy he remembers. "What could be more just than that, I ask you? It's the most reasonable thing in the world!" He lifts his shirt up again, this time rolling it slowly, seductively, exposing us to a sunken belly with a horizontal scar, a narrow chest, and frighteningly prominent ribs, the taut skin shriveled and dotted with ulcers. "It could go by chins, like we said, but as far as I'm concerned, we could have tax brackets." His shirt is still hiked up. Some people stare reluctantly, others turn away and let out soft whistles. He considers the responses with bare, ravenous fervor. "I demand a progressive flesh tax! Assessments shall be based on spare tires, potbellies, asses, thighs, cellulite, man boobs, and that bit that dangles up here on women's arms! The good thing about my method is there's no finagling and no misinterpreting: you gain the weight, you pay the rate!" He finally lets his shirt drop. "But seriously, for the life of me I cannot understand what's up with taking taxes from people who make money. Where's the logic in that? Listen, Netanyahu, and listen closely: taxes

should only be levied on people who the state has reasonable cause to believe are happy. People who smile to themselves, people who are young, healthy, optimistic, who whistle in the daytime, who get laid at night. Those are the only shitheads who should be paying taxes, and they should be stripped of everything they own!"

Most of the audience claps supportively, but a few, mostly the younger people, round their lips and boo. He wipes the sweat off his forehead and cheeks with a huge red circus--clown handkerchief and lets the two groups bicker among themselves for a while, to everyone's delight. Meanwhile, he gets his breath back, shades his eyes, and looks for me again, insisting on my eyes. Here it is now--a shared flicker that no one but the two of us, I hope, can detect. You came, his look says. Look what time has done to us, here I am before you, show me no mercy.

He quickly turns away and puts his hand up to quiet the audience. "What? I couldn't hear you. Speak up, table nine! Yes, but first I just want you to explain how you people do that, because I've never been able to figure it out. What do you mean, do what? That thing where you join your eyebrows together! No, honestly, tell us, do you sew one to the other? Do they teach you how to do it at your ethnic boot camp?" He pauses for an instant, then barrels ahead: "Talking about browbeating, my father was a hard-line Revisionist. He idolized Jabotinsky--respect!" A few vigorous, defiant rounds of applause come from some tables, and he waves his hand dismissively. "Okay, table nine, talk to me. Don't hold back, it's on me. What? No, I wasn't joking, Gargamel, it really is my birthday. Exactly at this minute, more or less, in the old Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, my mother, Sarah Greenstein, went into labor! Unbelievable, isn't it? A woman who claimed to want only the best for me, and yet she gave birth to me! I mean, think about how many trials and prisons and investigations and crime series there are because of murder, but I've yet to hear a single case involving birth! Nothing about premeditated birth, negligent birth, accidental birth, no...

Other Books

The pen and the sword. This issue of *The Jewish Quarterly* explores the rich, tragic, tumultuous history of the Jews of Ukraine, who have played a pivotal role in modern religious, cultural and intellectual Jewish life. Ukraine has been the site of some of the darkest moments in Jewish history, yet its Jews were central to the foundation of the Hasidic and Zionist movements and to the advancement of Hebrew and Yiddish literature, as well as to the evolution of modern-day Ukraine. In a probing essay, Vladislav Davidzon, who has been observing and writing about Ukrainian Jewish life for more than a decade, explores the turbulent history and uncertain future of a community whose fate has often had repercussions for the world beyond. The issue also includes an essay by Steven Nadler that provides new insights into the excommunication of Spinoza, an account by Iiris Makler of the changing character of the Old City of Jerusalem, and more.

🔍 🔍 🔍 🔍 🔍 . In *The Maiden of Kazan* (2015), she walks the protagonist, Idit, along a *via dolorosa*,

from her dream of marriage ... David Grossman, surprised readers with his excellent 2014 novel about a stand-up comic, A Horse Walks Into a Bar ."