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At the End Of that Autumn: A Midwinter Epilogue

(Excerpt from < *In the Land of Israel* >)

— Amos Oz

And how are things going in the port city of Ashdod?

A bright sea-blue washes over the broad avenues and apartment buildings this morning. Vines have climbed up the rows of identical buildings, forming their lacy patterns over the cinder blocks. Shade trees grace the yards. On almost every corner is a kindergarten, and from almost every kindergarten drift the voices of children's songs. A bell from a nearby school rings and a river of blue uniforms sweeps into the asphalt schoolyard. I linger at the fence for a moment to overhear a snatch of conversation. One of the pupils says, "He brings politics into everything. Even into Bible class. Does he think the Bible's a newspaper? A book about politics? It's a spiritual book! It's symbolic."

Another pupil cuts him off, grabs his wrist and says, "Listen, now listen – you're too extreme; of course there are political implications to everything, even in the Bible, just like you could say that politics has Biblical implications. It all ties in to the same subject." "Do you have any idea of what you're saying? Abraham and Isaac – and politics? The Prophets – and politics? What do you think – Moses was a member of the Likud? Or Labor? It's an inter-Jewish book. Well, I'd say it's even an interhuman book!"

Later, at the streetcorner, an elderly man, his sad face tight in concentration, carefully parks his car, locks it, and has started to walk away when he suddenly slaps his forehead and returns to the car to remove a package wrapped in brown paper. At nine thirty, an attractive woman unlocks her perfumery. She goes out to the sidewalk, a straw broom in hand, and sweeps the sidewalk in front of her shop.

Not far away, on a park bench, sits a bespectacled old man in a faded black suit, reading a Romanian-language newspaper. I sit down beside him, trying to imprint the morning voices of urban Ashdod on my memory; somewhere close behind me, pigeons coo. Noisy birds charter from the branches of the trees on the avenue. At a distance a large truck passes, its brakes panting, its gears grinding. A woman beats a rug or a mattress. A disco song drifts from the radio, then an Israeli folk song, and after that a soft instrumental piece. Ashdod in the morning. A ship bellows from the direction of the port and the birds answer. The elderly Romanian suddenly turns to me and speaks in a broken Hebrew jargon mingled with Yiddish and a touch of French: "Now is not winter, not summer. Now is something very good. Can breathe a little."

I concur.

"Too bad is not this way all the time," he says. "In summer is hot and in winter is strong wind and is rain. But rain – very important, yes! For our agriculture!"

I concur once more, and ask the man where he is from.

"From Dalet quarter. But now I am pensioner. There is time."

And from where did he come to Ashdod?

"Ploiesti. Is the oil city. *Rumanish*. Here, in Ashdod we also have oil. They say – is right underneath Dalet quarter. Nobody dig it now, but when they dig it – will be very good here. Will come prosperity to the city and to Israel – will be peace."

And now? Things are not good?

"Oh, very good. Is prosperity now, too. The Arabs should only let live without the wars, we have here a paradise. Paradise with all kinds *tzuris*, is true, but what is life without the troubles? Me, I have the kidney troubles. Live from the dialysis. But you know, mister, a man what has been where I was, don't complain no more. We shouldn't complain. I seen Hitler; I seen Stalin – maybe you're too young – I seen the bestiality from the goyim. Then, after, I was living in Paris a couple years – is no paradise there, for sure: the people there is lonely. They make maybe a living, but is no life for them. I mean the Jews there, along with the goyim. Here is a so-so living, medium, but the people is always together. I don't mean about the politics, about the arguing. I mean about the life. The life here is all the time together – the troubles together, the happiness together. You remember when Europe song contest, mister? Everybody cried with happiness how the Jews beat the goyim: the Sephardim, the Ashkenazim, the religious, the Likud, the kibbutzim,

everybody felt together. Or like now from the dead what we lost in the Galilee war: so everybody cried together. I don't say... of course there is no-goodniks, even cheaters, there is uneducated, but is a minority. The majority is very good. Better than the goyish man. Mister don't think so? For instance, I had yesterday an incident. I brung the plumber, a Moroccan, name of Abram, a good friend from my boy. I had a whole wall was broken in my house, from the leaks. He fixes it all up, worked maybe three hours, and finally he takes the mop and the pail and cleans the whole mess what he made from the work fixes up the tiles. With the zinc glue. So how much I owe you, I ask him. So he says to me, Aren't you ashamed, Gramps? Didn't your boy help me out of my troubles in the army? And this is true: my son was giving him all sorts help. So I say to him: What, a beggar I am? Thanks God, I can pay. You tell me what I owe you and you don't shame me! So he laughs and says to me, Okay, Gramps, never mind, give me five bucks and I'll take a cup of coffee. Five dollars – for three hours working! And the materials – his! It was only so not to shame me. I tell you, that's the way it is in Eretz Yisrael when a Jew has a Jewish heart. With the goyim, the Jew becomes like a goy.

"I'll tell you what I believe, mister. Listen, everyone is good. Begin is good. Peres is good. Rabin is good. Of course, His Honor the president is good. And David Levy, too. Yossi Sarid was a pilot from the army before. Everybody's a hero. From all the communities. Everybody wants it should be good. Everybody gives from his life to the country. They should get respect for that! This argument what we got – is nothing; they have such in the best families. They argue? So they make up. Me – I'm for everybody. I already seen with my own eyes what the goyim got and what we got. The State of Israel – a very nice thing! There's even a lot of goyim what tell us bravo! You know what my dream is? I'll tell you. Mister is still young, maybe, but I'll tell you anyways. My dream is – before my time comes, they should give me two minutes on the television Friday night, when everybody is listening, and I will tell the young people what everybody should be saying here every morning and every night, should say thanks God for everything what we got here in this country: the army, the ministers by the Knesset, the El Al, the income tax even, the streets, the kibbutzim, the factories – the everything! What is this?! They forgot how we had it in this country in the beginning? There wasn't nothing! Sand and enemies! Now, thanks God, we got the State and everybody has what to eat and clothes and education – not enough yet, the education – and we even got a lot of luxury! What did

we have in the Diaspora? We had *bubkes*, that's what! This is a great honor to the Jewish people, what they done in this country so quick! Against all the *tzuris*! Only, all the Jews what lives in America, in France, in Russia, by Khomeini even, should all come here quick, we should have all the Jewish people at home.

"That's what I want to say on the television. From a simple man in the street. In Romania I was a wood worker. In Ashdod I worked in wood, too. Now – a pensioner. Once I saw Mrs. Golda Meir, she should rest in peace, by the city Afula. This was before she died. They gave me a great honor, to talk to Mrs. Golda Meir, she should rest in peace. So I said to her, I said, Mrs. Prime Minister, in Rumania I had much criticism, but there wasn't no freedom to talk. There was fear. In Eretz Yisrael, there is freedom to say anything, no fear, but you know what? I got no criticism. Nothing. Only compliments ... only thanks God. That's what I said to her. I didn't want to tell her about the *tzuris*: doesn't she have enough troubles already? I got to add her another kvetch? But the young people we got today, they see the holes – they don't see the cheese. That's a saying in French. It is ten o'clock already? Excuse me, mister, I got to go by the bank here. You're still young. Don't worry!"

In the center of town, near a movie theater, is an enclosed, paved square surrounded by shops and shaded by one giant, heavy-topped tree. Tables snake their way into the square from several cafés. And there is a boutique, a perfumery, bank branches, a bookstore, a hardware store, and a restaurant. Mothers sit near their babies' carriages and pass the morning in the sea breeze. Two beauties, well aware of their attractions, enter the perfumery, seemingly ignoring my glances and the glances of three sun-tanned wolves – dandiest – heir shirts carelessly open to reveal the gold chains at their necks as they sit at the adjacent table, exchanging experienced glances and loud, clever expert opinions. The afternoon newspapers arrive at ten thirty, and soon everyone, including me, the wolves, and even several of the mothers, are absorbed in the headlines.

At a side table sits a man of about forty, modishly dressed, an attaché case open before him. He is industriously writing something without lifting his head; he might be filling out income-tax forms or the football lottery, or preparing a legal brief. Perhaps he, like me, joins word to word.

A small Mediterranean city is Ashdod, a pleasant city, unpretentious, with a port and a lighthouse, and a power station and factories and many landscaped avenues. Not

pretending to be Paris or Zurich or aspiring to be Jerusalem. A city planned by social democrats: without imperial boulevards, without monuments, without grandiose merchants' homes. A city living entirely in the present tense, a clean city, almost serene. The horns of passing cars do not squeal, the pedestrians do not run. It seems that almost everybody here knows almost everybody. If there is poverty here it is not glaring. Even the wealth of the suburb of villas near the beach is not ostentatious. A city of workers and businessmen and artisans and housewives. Of the sixty or seventy thousand souls here, about half are immigrants from North Africa, approximately one-third come from Western Europe and the Americas, and the remainder are native-born. At this morning hour, a weekday serenity rests on Ashdod: the men at work, some of the women at work, some at home. The children have gone off to day-care centers or to school. You will find no Light unto the Nations here, but also no ghetto or slum – only a small, bright port city rapidly growing and expanding to the south and east.

Back in 1948, the Egyptian army columns reached Ashdod on their way to Tel Aviv, only twenty miles to the north. Here they were stopped by two daring pilots, one of whom was shot down, and here they were repelled in a desperate night attack by the fighters of the fledgling Israeli army. After the Egyptians were repelled, only the barren sand dunes remained. Later a transit camp of tin shacks was put up between the dunes, under blazing sun, amid the garbage dumps, the flies, and the treacherous sandy roads. Taking hasty leave of their homes, Jewish refugees were brought here, people persecuted and bitter. And there was a cry of injustice, of injury, but worse than the cry was their humbled submission.

In 1957 the beginnings of a city were built here. In 1966 the port was dedicated. Afterward the large power station was built. In the early 1970s the country was in an uproar over the violent strikes and the bitter labor disputes that broke out here. But nowadays Ashdod is not in the headlines.

From a wooden tray slung from his neck, a wrinkled peddler offers me a comb or a pair of scissors or a bar of soap. I tell him that I don't need anything. And he, for no reason, wishes me well. At the corner of the square a youth in his high-school uniform sets up an easel and begins to sketch something. About half an hour later I peek at his work: it is a sketch of this very square as captured through his own strange, private vision. A thread of sadness is woven through the drawing. He has added long shadows to each of the objects.

And the figures he has scattered across the square are thin, long, faceless, all of them for some reason wrapped in black monks' cowls. What does this young artist see here? What has he brought to this scene? And from where? My two neighbors sitting on the bench and chatting in soft voices are joined by a woman, full-bodied, with large earrings and a dress that generously reveals the slopes of her attractive breasts. I eavesdrop and jot down crumbs of conversation.

"So, how's life, Jeanette?"

"Slipping through my fingers – like my salary. How're things by you, Yosef? How's the new house coming along?"

"Terrific! I finished the roof – you wouldn't believe it – all by myself – no contractor, no laborers, with these two hands. Only, with the concrete Asulin came to help me out. It's coming along great. Maybe it'll be finished by Passover and we'll be able to move in. Only thing is, the money has to hold out. How those green backs go! Incredible!"

"And how are the kids?"

"Rami got out of the army the day before yesterday. Yael probably told you: he did two months in Damour, and after that he was in Beirut – got as far as Yuniye, he did. He came back a bit depressed, like all of them. There are arguments in the house – it's awful. Only thing is, next week he starts in Beersheba. At the university. He's taking literature and Judaica, he is."

"What kind of living is he going to make out of literature and Judaica?"

"I ask myself the same question, believe me. He don't know the first thing about anything, this kid. Maybe he'll be a teacher. A welfare case. Maybe he'll get a job with some newspaper. Or he'll go into politics. Always had a brain, he did. And what a gift of gab – a silver tongue! Like Begin. Actually, he's not for Begin, but he talks every bit as pretty as Begin. His opinions he gets from his mother, not from me. I'm no match for him in an argument. Takes me out on points, this kid. Even when I'm all riled up, I get a kick out of listening to how he builds an argument. Like pouring concrete, I swear!"

"Why don't you come over on Friday? And you'll bring him along? David'll work on him a little. Besides, David brought us a video. We'll watch movies from the cassette. Later on you can talk politics, have a drink. Why don't you come?"

"This Friday – it's out. We're in Tiberias, only Yael doesn't know about it yet: I'm going to surprise her. A treat. Five-star hotel. But why don't you come to us next Friday? And

maybe we won't talk politics, after all. I've got a headache and a butt-ache from this stuff already. We'll talk something else. This country can really get right into your bones. There're other things in life, no?"

* * *

And what is, at best, is the city of Ashdod.

A pretty city and to my mind a good one, this Ashdod. And she is all we have that is our own. Even in culture and in literature: Ashdod. All those who secretly long for the charms of Paris or Vienna, for the Jewish *shtetl*, or for heavenly Jerusalem: do not cut loose from those longings – for what are we without our longings? – but let's remember that Ashdod is what there is. And she is not quite the grandiose fulfillment of the vision of the Prophets and of the dream of generations; not quite a world premiere, but simply a city on a human scale. If only we try to look at her with a calm eye, we will surely not be shamed or disappointed.

Ashdod is a city on a human scale on the Mediterranean coast. And from her we shall see what will flower when peace and a little repose finally come.

Patience, I say. There is no shortcut.

Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel*, trans. Maurie Goldberg-Bartura (San Diego: Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, 1983), pp. 219-241.

Amos Oz, among Israel's most prominent authors, has published 38 novels, among them *My Michael* (1968), *Black Box* (1987), and *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2002). His books have been translated into 42 languages. In addition to novels Oz has published essays and articles on culture and society. Several have been published in the collections *Under This Blazing Light* (1978), and *In the Land of Israel* (2008). He is the recipient of numerous local and international awards, including the Israel Prize (1998), the Goethe Prize (2005) and the Heinrich Heine Prize (2008). His latest books are the story collection *Between Friends* (2012) and *Jews and Words* (2012, written with his daughter historian Fania Oz-Saltzberger).