



BEING THERE

JERZY KOSINSKI

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

The hero of this astonishing novel is called Chance - he may be the man of tomorrow. Flung into the real world when his rich benefactor dies, Chance is helped on his life journey by Elizabeth Eve, the young, beautiful, resourceful wife of a dying Wall Street mogul. Accidentally launched into a world of sex, money, power - and national television - he becomes a media superstar, a household name, the man of the hour - and, who knows, perhaps the next President of the United States of America.

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BEING THERE

Jerzy Kosinski

For *KATHERINA v.F.* who
taught me that love is more
than the longing to be
together

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It was Sunday. Chance was in the garden. He moved slowly, dragging the green hose from one path to the next, carefully watching the flow of the water. Very gently he let the stream touch every plant, every flower, every branch of the garden. Plants were like people; they needed care to live, to survive their diseases, and to die peacefully.

Yet plants were different from people. No plant is able to think about itself or able to know itself; there is no mirror in which the plant can recognize its face; no plant can do anything intentionally: it cannot help growing, and its growth has no meaning, since a plant cannot reason or dream.

It was safe and secure in the garden, which was separated from the street by a high, red brick wall covered with ivy, and not even the sounds of the passing cars disturbed the peace. Chance ignored the streets. Though he had never stepped outside the house and its garden, he was not curious about life on the other side of the wall.

The front part of the house where the Old Man lived might just as well have been another part of the wall or the street. He could not tell if anything in it was alive or not. In the rear of the ground floor facing the garden, the maid lived. Across the hall Chance had his room and his bathroom and his corridor leading to the garden.

What was particularly nice about the garden was that at any moment, standing in the narrow paths or amidst the bushes and trees, Chance could start to wander, never knowing whether he was going forward or backward, unsure whether he was ahead of or behind his previous steps. All that mattered was moving in his own time, like the growing plants.

Once in a while Chance would turn off the water and sit on the grass and think. The wind, mindless of direction,

intermittently swayed the bushes and trees. The city's dust settled evenly, darkening the flowers, which waited patiently to be rinsed by the rain and dried by the sunshine. And yet, with all its life, even at the peak of its bloom, the garden was its own graveyard. Under every tree and bush lay rotten trunks and disintegrated and decomposing roots. It was hard to know which was more important: the garden's surface or the graveyard from which it grew and into which it was constantly lapsing. For example, there were some hedges at the wall which grew in complete disregard of the other plants; they grew faster, dwarfing the smaller flowers, and spreading onto the territory of weaker bushes.

Chance went inside and turned on the TV. The set created its own light, its own color, its own time. It did not follow the law of gravity that forever bent all plants downward. Everything on TV was tangled and mixed and yet smoothed out: night and day, big and small, tough and brittle, soft and rough, hot and cold, far and near. In this colored world of television, gardening was the white cane of a blind man.

By changing the channel he could change himself. He could go through phases, as garden plants went through phases, but he could change as rapidly as he wished by twisting the dial backward and forward. In some cases he could spread out into the screen without stopping, just as on TV people spread out into the screen. By turning the dial, Chance could bring others inside his eyelids. Thus he came to believe that it was he, Chance, and no one else, who made himself be.

The figure on the TV screen looked like his own reflection in a mirror. Though Chance could not read or write, he resembled the man on TV more than he differed from him. For example, their voices were alike.

He sank into the screen. Like sunlight and fresh air and mild rain, the world from outside the garden entered Chance, and Chance, like a TV image, floated into the world, buoyed up by a force he did not see and could not name.

He suddenly heard the creak of a window opening above his head and the voice of the fat maid calling. Reluctantly he got up, carefully turned off the TV, and stepped outside. The fat maid was leaning out of the upstairs window flapping her arms. He did not like her. She had come some time after black Louise had gotten sick and returned to Jamaica. She was fat. She was from abroad and spoke with a strange accent. She admitted that she did not understand the talk on the TV, which she watched in her room. As a rule he listened to her rapid speech only when she was bringing him food and telling him what the Old Man had eaten and what she thought he had said. Now she wanted him to come up quickly.

Chance began walking the three flights upstairs. He did not trust the elevator since the time black Louise had been trapped in it for hours. He walked down the long corridor until he reached the front of the house.

The last time he had seen this part of the house some of the trees in the garden, now tall and lofty, had been quite small and insignificant. There was no TV then. Catching sight of his reflection in the large hall mirror, Chance saw the image of himself as a small boy and then the image of the Old Man sitting in a huge chair. His hair was gray, his hands wrinkled and shriveled. The Old Man breathed heavily and had to pause frequently between words.

Chance walked through the rooms, which seemed empty; the heavily curtained windows barely admitted the daylight. Slowly he looked at the large pieces of furniture shrouded in old linen covers, and at the veiled mirrors. The words that the Old Man had spoken to him the first time had wormed their way into his memory like firm roots. Chance was an orphan, and it was the Old Man himself who had sheltered him in the house ever since Chance was a child. Chance's mother had died when he was born. No one, not even the Old Man, would tell him who his father was. While some could learn to read and write, Chance would never be able

to manage this. Nor would he ever be able to understand much of what others were saying to him or around him. Chance was to work in the garden, where he would care for plants and grasses and trees which grew there peacefully. He would be as one of them: quiet, open-hearted in the sunshine and heavy when it rained. His name was Chance because he had been born by chance. He had no family. Although his mother had been very pretty, her mind had been as damaged as his: the soft soil of his brain, the ground from which all his thoughts shot up, had been ruined forever. Therefore, he could not look for a place in the life led by people outside the house or the garden gate. Chance must limit his life to his quarters and to the garden: he must not enter other parts of the household or walk out into the street. His food would always be brought to his room by Louise, who would be the only person to see Chance and talk to him. No one else was allowed to enter Chance's room. Only the Old Man himself might walk and sit in the garden. Chance would do exactly what he was told or else he would be sent to a special home for the insane where, the Old Man said, he would be locked in a cell and forgotten.

Chance did what he was told. So did black Louise. As Chance gripped the handle of the heavy door, he heard the screeching voice of the maid. He entered and saw a room twice the height of all the others. Its walls were lined with built-in shelves, filled with books. On the large table flat leather folders were spread around.

The maid was shouting into the phone. She turned and, seeing him, pointed to the bed. Chance approached. The Old Man was propped against the stiff pillows and seemed poised intently, as if he were listening to a trickling whisper in the gutter. His shoulders sloped down at sharp angles, and his head, like a heavy fruit on a twig, hung down to one side. Chance stared into the Old Man's face. It was white, the upper jaw overlapped the lower lip of his mouth, and only one eye remained open, like the eye of a dead bird that