

Everything All Over Again

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God was leaping about and laughing boisterously like a boy.

“My, my, they’re coming back! When I settled them in Eden, I told them: don’t eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, because you and all your kin will die. So now they’ve gotten what they deserved and have been taught a lesson to the end of time. They wanted to raise themselves above God—and everything went to rack and ruin. What a lesson for the disobedient!”

The angels stood in a motionless wall behind God, their faces frozen in fawning smiles. Adam and Eve, covered with ash as if dressed in unbleached cloth, were heavily walking up the slope toward Eden, stopping time and again, sadly glancing back at the Earth, which was burning on the horizon. Wading across a brook, Eve scooped up a handful of water and washed the ash off her face. But now her face was contorted with such a silent scream of despair and grief and her eyes had such a horrible expression that even God’s heart was stirred with compassion. In violation of the program the Chancellery had drawn up and He Himself had endorsed, God stepped forward toward the humans. But at that very same moment the Minister of Ceremonies waved his baton and the angels burst out in a joyously exhortative hosanna:

“Glory to the Almighty! Glory! Glory! Glory!”

The angels took God under the arms and sat Him on a throne garishly decorated with precious stones that seemed to be cut out of a rainbow. The throne was too tall for the lean old biblical God. His bare feet hung down without reaching the floor, and God tugged at His traditional robe lest the people see His bare calves. The choir kept on thundering, until waves rippled in the sky. God’s retinue lined up around the throne, each according to his status and rank, and began studying the mechanically duplicated scripts to see who was supposed to say what and when. From that point on, everything strictly followed the program: God’s face became dignified and He assumed the posture of a heavenly all-knowing judge with a bulging chest, much like the one in the images of earthly icon painters. Now only the black smoke blanketing the horizon and rising from the thermonuclear fire that was consuming the Earth alarmed God somewhat and hindered His concentration on the grand scheme of things.

In the meantime Adam and Eve had come closer. God recalled with

elegiac sadness the time when He was still a young God, just a beginner: when creating was as easy as breathing air, when in one week He separated the light from the darkness, created both the Earth and the sky and everything living on Earth—from bacteria to gigantic mammoths, even creating man, and then inventing for Himself a seventh day of rest. You never know in advance what will become of the things you create: the bacteria He had created so casually, as if He were shelling peanuts, had multiplied and were living everywhere—in the water, air, and even in the soil—while the mammoths had become extinct a long time ago, though He remembered to this day how He had personally chiseled tusks for the mammoths and had experimented with positioning them on either side of their heads, to achieve both beauty and convenience. He knew about the bacteria and mammoths because the angels had brought from Earth a secondary school textbook on natural history, which He had read through omnivorously in a single night.

It was true. He had been in a hurry when creating man—it was a Saturday and that meant an early closing. He got carried away with keeping to schedule, at the cost of maintaining quality. He should have considered everything more deliberately and foreseen all the details. Back then, He lacked experience. Now He had both experience and wisdom, but He no longer had the life-giving power He had had back then. He hadn't worked in clay for a long time and so He had lost the touch in molding it. Now He just listened to the hollow glorification of the angels and scratched about in His garden like a hen. At the painful thought that His happy days of Creation were probably over, God became crotchety and said to the humans with a malicious smile:

"Well, what good were your vaunted sciences? Wanted to get the better of God, did you? Planets, galaxies, the universe! 'We'll transform nature, fathom the mystery of matter!' Wanted to outdo the Creator of the world! And what's the outcome? You read in the Bible that I created the world in six days, on the seventh day I rested. But you have destroyed everything in just one day, and now you can rest on the ashes!"

"In the global context of the development of civilization a mistake is definitely possible. Perhaps we miscalculated somewhere," Adam rejoined gloomily. But in his voice there was no repentance, only a stubborn desire to find the mistake and understand it. "The phases in the development of matter..."

"You didn't take yourselves into account—your own selves!" God cut him off, because He did not like the scientific terminology of the humans. He was a self-taught hands-on practitioner, not a theoretician. "You managed to deduce that the Universe began as a vacuum, but you lacked the brains to take a closer look at the vacuum in your own souls."

Adam seemed undisturbed by God's ire. Instead, he kept looking around intently and tenaciously, as if mentally breaking down God and the

angels and everything that caught His eye into the simplest elements and delving into their nature. God found this quality in humans disagreeable, just as He did their scientific gibberish. He had disliked it from the start, ever since He created Adam and Eve and settled them in Eden, where they—what did they lack there?!—craved the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. It seemed funny to Him how they went out of their way to analyze everything, to get at everything with their own reason, especially now, when they had such an opportunity to realize on their own the terrible consequences knowledge can lead to. Well, that's always been their habit—disobedience, independence, and an irresistible desire to know. Even before the Tree of Knowledge had grown and before Eden existed, when He had only just formed the first man out of the dust of the ground and breathed life into him, no sooner had Adam blinked his eyes than off he went—no humility or gratitude, but questions galore. Where was he? Who was he? And who was that One with clay on His hands? Later, when God was creating the beasts of the field and the fowl of the air and wanted to name them, Adam had not given Him a chance to shape a thought or speak a word but insisted: "I'll do it myself. Let me do it!" So now you've gone and done it yourself!

God gladly turned His gaze to Eve. Here was His best creation! Though crafted out of Adam's rib, she was nothing at all like that smart aleck. She was the embodiment of gentleness, kindness, and beauty. Even today, after all she had gone through, she was beautiful—and what finesse! Modern ladies' wear, all those tightly fitting jeans and tops, made the dazzling lines of the female body that He had designed all the more pleasing to the eye. The angels had lugged up a color TV set to Heaven and amused themselves by watching the images from Earth. Now and then God too glanced at the TV screen. He was knowledgeable about fashion and now realized the absurdity of the leather overalls He had made for the humans Himself when He chased them out of Eden. Eve was a good example of the importance of creative inspiration—today, try as He might, He would not be able to create such an Eve. He still tried molding once in a while. Angels brought Him the best clay from Earth and tried to create the perfect conditions for creativity. They even shut off the wind in Eden and stifled the disturbing cries of the birds. But the newly molded creatures that now jumped, fluttered, or crawled from His hands were all monstrosities. On Earth they would be attributed to the impact of radiation and recorded in lists of the anomalies of nature. Suddenly God realized that for creativity in the true sense of the word, He required the presence of humans. He needed the eyes of Eve, which would be enraptured by His creations, and the covert skepticism of Adam. Because everything He did during those unforgettable days of Creation had been done for them.

God looked into the eyes of Eve and again pain stabbed His heart, this time much deeper and sharper. For a fleeting moment He saw what she had

seen and experienced during the last days on Earth. Like winged sharks, rockets flew low over the Earth thundering and roaring. Forests flared up like matches, mountains crumbled to dust, people were set ablaze and died out like sparks, without leaving a trace, and children died, too. Rivers boiled and evaporated, leaving behind dry black channels, and the visible sky curled into a fiery scroll. Horror seized God at the sight. The burning Earth beyond the horizon now seemed much nearer and dearer, and unwittingly He was stirred from an age-old sheltered slumber.

Impulsively God slid from His throne and the angels burst out in an exhortative, "Glory to the Almighty! Glory! Glory! Glory!" but He gave them a squint-eyed look: "Hush!"

Offended, the choir fell silent as the Minister of Ceremonies demonstratively broke his baton. But God was no longer concerned with the finer points of courtly etiquette. Suddenly He was sick of all the comedy the angels had been staging around Him throughout the ages while He had played the part of the principal buffoon—even getting a big kick out of it, like a small child. He was ashamed to recall how every morning, as soon as the sun reached the earthly horizon, He would pull up the weight of the Universal Clock while the choir of angels chanted the acclamations, calling Him the All-Wise One and the Morning Star and the Supreme Being—even though He, the angels, and everyone else down to the pettiest clerks of the heavenly administration knew that the sun would roll over the firmament, the stars and planets would continue circling, and the galaxies would keep on pulsating regardless whether or not He pulled up the decorative weight of the decorative clock. By now God had already forgotten how this game of solemn morning appearances, hosannas, glorifications, courtly hierarchy, and the angels' courtly intrigues began, a game in which He performed the part of a gilded clown, idol, and puppet manipulated by covertly pulled strings. It seemed that the game had begun shortly after the days of Creation, when He chased the humans out of Eden and was left all alone, since the angels were essentially nothing more than a figment of fantasy.

What happiness it was to have had, through all this infinite time, a garden of His own, where He could escape when He desired silence and calm after the noisy ceremonies around the throne. It was as if He had known that sooner or later Adam and Eve would return to Heaven, and had preserved Eden for them here, notwithstanding the fact that the Chancellery had already begun to sell off items from this, His last refuge, to the omnipresent tourists for heavenly currency.

God waved His hand imperiously, and the curtain, garishly decorated with shiny angels, fell. He remained on this side, with the humans. He no longer needed to pretend to be holding the universe on His shoulders. Quite nimbly for His millions of years, God made for the Garden of Eden. The cherub He had ordered to stand guard at the Tree of Life when He chased the first humans from Eden gave a flap of his wings, raising a cloud of age-

old dust, and a flame leaped from the tip of his fiery sword.

"They're with me," God said, nodding toward Adam and Eve, who were following.

"They still need a pass from the Chancellery, like all tourists."

"They're not tourists. They've come to Eden for good."

"Even if they're eligible for settlement, I've got orders," the cherub declared, standing his ground.

God gave him an angry look—and the cherub's wings dropped, while the flame on the tip of the sword died away. God was regaining His former strength.

This was perhaps the first time that He was entering His garden as a full-fledged master since the Chancellery's decree permitting excursion groups to visit the garden. (The angels were bringing books from Earth ever more frequently—mostly historical novels—arousing an interest in history, specifically the days of Creation. The Chancellery took advantage of this interest to help underwrite the cost of maintaining such a huge retinue of supervisors, guards, singers, musicians, servants, wing-brushers, and all the other minions without whom heavenly life could no longer be imagined, let alone the Chancellery itself, which kept expanding and required ever greater funds.) Though permitted to move only in groups, with a guide in the lead, and only on the groomed and marked paths, the excursionists nevertheless overran the farthest nooks and crannies of the garden, trampled the grass, picked fruit—even of the Tree of Life, although they were guaranteed immortality anyway—and pruned their plumage, which was categorically forbidden. Feathers and down fluttered over the bushes of Eden like snowflakes in an earthly winter (God had seen winter on the color TV recently). God hid in the shrubs and raspberry bushes, or made Himself invisible, but that did not help because the noise in the garden was as loud as in a stadium (more and more angels were becoming soccer fans and God frequently heard the choristers exchange whispers of "What was the score today?" behind His back). God had dispatched an angry complaint to the Chancellery, from which came a reply that in its actions the Chancellery was guided by the regulations He Himself had approved, with reference to the appropriate paragraphs. God realized that rebelling against the Chancellery was tantamount to rebelling against His own self, and so He threw up His hands.

There were no tourists in the Garden of Eden that day: Heaven's idlers had flown off to see how the Earth was being turned into dust. At the risk of burning their feathers the aesthetes dived into the nuclear fire to save books and paintings from libraries, museums, and art galleries. Those who had no interest in earthly art or philosophy lugged gold, tableware, lace, and every other kind of junk up to Heaven. Along the horizon stretched a string of winged marauders with packages on their backs and bundles in their arms. Some angels had lovers on Earth and children by them, despite specific

prohibitions from the Chancellery. These libertines were now circling over the ashes like gulls over ruined nests, but for the humans—except the first, Adam and Eve—the way to Heaven was barred.

God turned His gaze away from the smoke-enveloped Earth and joyfully inhaled the fragrances of the orchard.

"What an aroma! Like nectar!" God said excitedly to the humans. "And just listen to the nightingales! And the orioles! Your orchestras are nothing compared to the concerts you'll hear in this place at sunrise! The acacias are blossoming on the hills, and toward evening their fragrance rises up the slopes into my garden. And this here, this is not an acacia but an oleaster exuding such a fragrance of honey. What I love most, though, is jasmine. Would you like to stroll down the jasmine lane? This willow over here is home to a flock of starlings. It's old and rotten; the holes woodpeckers bored in it are as smooth as if made by a drill, and the starlings have settled inside. I love chatting with the starlings. Oh, the magpies and jays are fighting again! That's enough, scram! And that tree over there is a Japanese cherry. The angels brought it from Earth as a present. When it comes into bloom the entire tree flowers, and later the cherries seem to hang on a string without any stalks. Under the birch trees I planted daisies. Aren't they beautiful against the green background? The walnut tree is growing slowly. There was an old one there that was withering, so I uprooted it. And here I have a grove of cranberry. I love the cranberry blooms for their remarkably pure color, the color of light, like the light I separated from the darkness at the very beginning. It'll be good for you here. I allow you to eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—but avoid the Tree of Knowledge, since you yourselves have learned where that leads. The less you know, the easier it is to live. Now here is the hut where you began your life. Don't think about anything at all. Sweeten your soul and your body and take delight in the Garden of Eden. Eventually I shall give you fruit from the Tree of Life, and you will become immortal like the gods, and everything that's been on Earth will seem like a bad dream."

God was so completely carried away that He saw only His garden and heard only Himself. Suddenly His consciousness was penetrated by a mournful, desperate cry. God was struck with fear—he had never heard anything like it in Heaven. He turned around. Eve was crying, her entire body convulsed with loud sobs. Her knees buckled and she dropped into the grass like a pruned twig. For the first time God felt the enormity of the pain of a mother whose billions of children—for all the people on Earth were Eve's children—had perished in a single earthly day, the pain of a flower burning in fire, the final horror of a fish at the bottom of a river suddenly gone dry, and the final flutter of birds' wings caught in the flames.

God, too, wanted to drop into the grass and weep like Eve. But He did not know how to weep. His eyes shifted to Adam. Adam's body seemed to have turned to stone, his muscles didn't move, not a single sound escaped

from his compressed pale lips, and only his eyes, under half-closed lids, reflected his torment and racking pain. Adam, too, did not know how to weep, which made his distress all the harder to bear. Only a single tear formed in the corner of Adam's eye rolled down his pale, seemingly lifeless marmoreal cheek, and fell onto the grass. On the spot where the tear landed the grass immediately yellowed, as if touched by fire. Adam bent down and raised Eve, who continued to weep bitterly. He embraced her and stroked her head as if she were a child.

That night it rained. Resting in His little cottage under the Tree of Life, God listened to the raindrops pattering against the windowpanes. He heard the rain whispering to the straw thatch and the murmur of the swollen stream in the willows. It wasn't the first time that it had rained in the Garden of Eden, nor was it the first time that sleep had evaded God. But never before had He felt so peaceful during a rainfall. At long last everyone He loved was back home, at His side. It was such an earthly feeling. It made Him angry at Himself for turning into a human. But then He fell to thinking and calmed down: that's how it should be, for the soul had returned to the body and resurrected it. Without humans the garden was dead. Was it for the sake of the angel-tourists that He had planted and nurtured the garden? For in the Bible it is written (he had looked through the Bible not long ago, and although the God there was a malicious sort, the first pages about the Creation of the world were good): "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden . . ."

He had planted it for humans. Let them live there for all time to come, in warmth and grace, under the trees of paradise, without any earthly worries.

God did not keep track of time and did not know how many days or years had passed since Adam and Eve were in Eden again. God knew but one measure of time—eternity. Only the Earth, like a marvelous colored clock, marked the passage of time. The conflagration died out at last, and the Earth turned from pink to dark blue. Soon the smoke dissolved, and the Earth hung like a black apparition on the horizon. The seas and rivers filled with shimmering azure water again, and the continents timidly began turning green. The angels that visited Earth spoke of sprouts of plants bursting through asphalt highways and concrete airport runways, of forests covering the ruins of cities under a green tent, and of lush grasses carpeting yesterday's battlefields. Almost every day Adam and Eve walked up the hill above the Garden of Eden, where God had once placed a bench, and stood gazing at their Earth for a long time.

But God had no time either for earthly or for heavenly matters. He was creating again. Creative plans and ideas were lighting up His imagination like stars at the juncture of day and night. On their own His hands reached

for the clay and molded a plant, or an animal, or a bird hitherto unknown either in the Garden of Eden or on Earth. Even Adam, who was always at God's side, encouraging Him to create—to compensate for the excessive radiation on Earth—did not interfere. On the contrary, Adam's silent enchantment with the power of the creative spirit of nature, as he put it—thereby emphasizing his atheistic convictions—delighted God and spurred Him to keep working. All three of them were working now: Adam kneaded the clay, God molded and breathed life into His creations, and Eve planted herbs and saplings and, on the meadow along the river, grazed all the sorts of cattle God had invented.

Never again did God feel so good. One day at dusk an angel from the guards at the Garden of Eden paid God a visit. With his slender stature, slow gait, and changeable face, the angel resembled a serpent. Adam had once made fun of this angel: with his bare rudiments of wings, he seemed better suited to creep than to fly. The angel-serpent whispered into God's ear that every day Adam and Eve were eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the overripe ones that had dropped to the ground and the green ones alike. Eve was also gathering the seeds of every plant in the garden, including the new ones God was creating, hiding the seeds in bundles, and hanging them on the joists and rafters in the hut. The humans were preparing to return to Earth.

God did not believe the angel-serpent, knowing that the latter nursed a grudge against Adam. The next day He looked into the home of the humans. Seeing bundles of seeds hanging around the entire hut, two shovels set aside in the corner, along with a hoe, rake, and even a fishing lure (the angels had once presented it to God as an earthly souvenir), God lost heart and lost his interest in creating. After all, for whom was He doing this?

God tried to talk them out of leaving:

"What do you lack here? You're living in warmth, in wealth, with food and lodging included. But on Earth you'll have to start from scratch. Hasn't your experience taught you anything at all?"

"This time we'll be more prudent and take into account the mistakes of developed civilization," Adam pledged without interrupting his work—he was crafting a fishing net just then. "And we won't be starting from nothing, not from the Stone Age, but from an advanced stage of development."

Eve did not want to listen to anything. She seemed moonstruck and only talked about what she would plant on Earth, what cattle she'd have. She would also have a hen and a dog to guard the livestock and she would bear children and bring them up carefully, lest they become indolent. Her eyes no longer betrayed the former pain and desire to die and forget everything—now hope shone like stars in her eyes.

And God backed down.

The humans departed from Eden at dawn. Eve walked in front, sacks of seeds over her shoulders. Adam led a cow by a rope tied to its horns. It

had caterpillar tracks powered by little electric motors built into its hooves to prevent them from sinking into the earthly mud, and antenna-horns to pick up natural sound waves. With God's help Adam had made some of the improvements himself. On its back the cow bore garden implements and a wooden plow with a copper blade. Behind the humans ran a hen-dog. It didn't have a name yet, since God had molded it on the last day, combining a hen and a dog into one animal that could both bark and lay eggs.

God's eyes followed the humans for a long time, until they disappeared beyond the horizon. Gradually, the humans became nothing but a memory. So, too, faded His second youth, His outburst of creativity, and His decisiveness to turn against the Chancellery. He didn't notice that He was now spending most of His time on the garish throne once again. Behind the tall back of the throne the choir of angels lined up hurriedly, and someone asked by habit: "What was the score yesterday?" He was answered with a whisper: "It's the Copper Age on Earth; they're not playing soccer yet." The Minister of Ceremony waved his new baton:

"Glory to the Almighty! Glory! Glory! Glory!"

Supported under the arms by angels, God slid from the throne, shuffled to the Universal Clock, and pulled up the cast-iron weight. As soon as the sun peeped out above the horizon, He pushed the pendulum.

And it was everything all over again.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko

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