

Vasilis Afxentiou

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Athens, Greece  
vafx@hol.gr

LOOSE  
by  
Vasilis Afxentiou

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Up top, Charlie's eye seemed to be glued on what he held. He dithered more, undecided. Meanwhile down below, Satan's jaws crunched. He strutted back and forth in the gloomy fissure, the deepest in His blaze-lit, sulphur-reeking sovereignty, and His rusty chaffed face with nostrils flaring, glared up and sneered, snorting grunts and chuffing and casting bandeaux of spume.

He raised His yellow-brown hands incitingly, "I crave for the Inquisition, the children's crusades, the sprightly witch hunts, and those two sublime mushrooming obfuscations. Ah, those were the days, My lackeys."

Lately He had been having these pricks of elation, pangs of notorious jubilation. He espied on Charlie and other mortals above--mingled in crowds, snooped and eavesdropped to locate the source of these affections--but soon would become weary of their pointless prattle and skeptical attitude towards Evil. In place of rash rage and fury, He found them ruminating and poring over Freud and Hawking.

He spat.

Hadn't He racked and abused them enough over the eons? Such spleen and spite gone to waste. He anticipated exclusively the vilest, blindest passions and ill will to rule.

Instead...He got blinked at.

"Inactivity is what's doing it."

"But idle hands are the Devil's workshop," a red-eyed demon puffed out.

"See!" He hissed. "Even the laws of darkness are being confounded!"

Inaction was lacquering as well His own animosity to shoddy resentment, fraying His hostility down to the scruffy crust of His rangy clientele.

"Business is going to the dogs," He snarled and the gargoyles rattled nigh His clacking hoofs.

All the slithering things hissed and sputtered, defecated and slobbered down in the blistering guts of the earth.

"Isn't it the way it ought to be?" a scaly imp fumed from the ghastly gallery.

The underworld fell silent.

Satan swelled and let fly a jet of gore on the apprentice imp. "We never use the word 'ought' here."

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Vexed, Satan came up once again to meddle and pry.

He found mid-August a scorcher. Crickets popped from the heat, burst like pop-corn in near-by thistle and pines and toppled to the ground shattered. Lizards scurried for cover at His approach. A summer ruby dragonfly fluttered and dipped almost vertical in His path, then vaulted out of view. Clouds of metallic blue butterflies dispersed off their gold and waxen perches and rippled over his head.

He emerged close-by to the gates of Hell, a sandy stretch nudists patronised on the Aegean called Esperanza Island. To each side the beach spanned as level and regular as could be conceived for a kilometer or so. Then with a dull, lethargic bounce commenced to worm inward, finally rising in a smooth curve to meet the foot of the single distant mountain on the isle, behind a precipice, like some broad highway from the sea.

He pulled his horns in. Sucked his tail. Shucked off His scales. And metamorphosed into the Angel He once was.

He pouted out his lips, "God it's hot," He said, His new alto voice husky and almost as raspy as a man's.

"Did You call Me?" a tumult boomed from the sky.

The Old Man stood like an ancient Atlas on billowed white clouds, majestic and towering.

"O Lord!" Satan fidgeted with his nakedness. "A figure of speech."

"Didn't we agree for You to rule from below and I from above?"

Got to humour Him--got a hell of a temper, Satan thought, and became disconcerted.

"Are You trying to make this Your domain as well?" the Old Mighty asked and a sirocco ruffled Satan's red curls.

The breeze got stronger and the clouds tumbled like bowling balls.

God looked at the sprawled bodies, Mites on a Titan's gold scimitar, He thought, examining the crescent shore that dipped and became lost in a sea of azure blood.

He reminisced, How immaculate the blood of Gaia had been. How all shores once resembled this one.

He saddened, Vilified are the same seas now. Oil spills. Dumped radio-active canisters, swaying like cobra heads beneath crushing water depths. Eager to ejaculate their poison into life.

Life He had created.

In the begining Earth had been a fresh crunchy apple, beads of dew clinging to it. Mankind had been tucked deep away, safe in His heart of hearts. The touch of musk on His toes had consoled Him then, had made Him sigh with pleasure, compassion and grace.

Sensations of never before.

He remembered how the animals, the trees, the shrubs, the birds and the butterflies of every color, the kelp and the starfish had rushed out of Him exactly as He had imagined them. The tiny and the huge. Lastly, man, the crown jewel. He would enter their lairs and grottos and dreams and see Himself in them.

Now this.

Had ever present entropy overpowered Him?

Cosmology, He thought, pitted against the Overseer of Good.

He was ensued by a great void. He wondered if it all had not been a Divine mistake.

"Might I have not passed boredom on to them?"

"Say something, Lord?"

"SILENCE!"

The hideous ripping noise on all sides startled Satan. He gave a small scream, froze, thawed down to a jellyfish and oozed back up into his angel shape and reached for Charlie. Why, oh why did I ever take this job? Satan consternated.

A mistake, a moment of weakness, frivolity, God continued to ponder to Himself, the mortals inherited. The forbidden fruit of knowledge only to become their robe of wisdom.

The snare of God, God thought on reflection, was His utter lack of a wholesome awareness of Evil.

He feared that in His ignorance goodness's child had been a child of His loneliness and not of His Love and of His Law, but a yield to experimentation, curiosity and the restlessness of His youth.

Seven billion years, not seven days--how mortals simplified His grandeur to their measures--of maelstroming, taming and smithing a universe for the coming of life: strange, nebulous, breathtaking. All to prepare it for His new companions. Another five to hone the Earth to the exact of mankind's germaneness.

He had begun as if with a game, instead Creation had welled, overspilled beneath Him, dislodging from Him, like argent elvers splashing forth from a broken water bag. Cunning eyes, wily grins, pesky faces had beamed tenacity and aptness and survival. It was less a course of plan than happenstance.

He had been overwhelmed back then.

"Oh, so long ago."

"Toad turds to the three-hundred-and-fifty-days-of-sunshine. It's not September even."

"Who said that!" thunder boomed.

"Don't, Lord," Satan hurried and said, thinking that modesty can be overdone.

Satan turned to the other, "Charlie, button up."

There was an odd light in God's eyes, a sign that made Satan sorry He'd spoken at all.

"That's what the sign said. Over the airport terminal six years ago when I set foot here -- 'Three-hundred-and-fifty days of sunshine'. It's just their lousy luck," Charlie looked meaningfully at the Other and gestured to the sprawled tourists, "to be here the fifteen days it's going to douse."

"Six years ago, Charlie?"

"Yeah. Weather was different, a paradise." The youth's face suddenly became well-defined. A shaft of sun passed through a rift in the clouds and shone on it. He had regular features, brown round eyes, brown light hair and a slight growth of beard. He might have been a Kentucky farmer's boy. "Who were You talking to up there anyway?"

"Hear that, Lord? Things were different." Then to Charlie, "God, Charlie. To God. I may have saved your--you from eternity just now."

"Strong shit, ain't it?" Charlie dragged in a waft and Satan saw only the white of his eyes.

"Ouch!" All of Satan's defences went on alert.

"Is that mortal smoking hashish, Lucifer?" Amazement, dread and execration churned in the words.

The heavens boiled with white-grey fury. Clouds effused, irradiated red flashes against the silver and blue of the sky. The thick plumes puckered squarely over Charlie's stoned head.

Satan almost peed.

He could taste the hot, moist air of a killer storm brewing. No backing out now, He thought. He wasn't up here to save souls.

But new blood was what he wanted and it was pooled in Charlie's fate--and genom.

Humanity Mine, He lavished. Revive remorse of 'the slumming life', arouse compunction about ol' avarice, coveting, and civil strife; contrition for good ol' false pride, bipartisan morass; and just sit back and make room for the guilt-beset, shame-ridden hoards....If Charlie only keeps his flappers fused.

He rummaged to get His act together. For Hell's sake.

He had come to realize on His sojourns that it wasn't that mortals didn't take Him under account, no.

People merely dread more the evil in themselves, and what it can do to them while still in this life, than what I dish out in the next.

People simply feared more for the here and now than afterlife.

Today they wanted association, the New Order, brotherhood, prophylactics, life for Rwanda; and it all had started when those hippy heads sprouted, and more recently, when that Tipler fellah was being tipped with the inside dope--straight from up there.

Satan gruffed.

He needed old fashion, unequivocal Gospel Sinning. Sin-anxious mortals. None of this doubt-eradicating, Cosmos-probing, high-tech-for-high-peace stuff.

"Our mysteries are Ours," He grunted.

No yippie yo-yos shouting, Make business not war, or, Greenpeace greenbutts yodelling, Be true to blue.

He wanted the greenback to read In Arms We Trust and, by gosh, the Wall put back up.

"He's been getting all the kudos," Satan griped under His breath, "and I all the barbs."

There was much to justify in His own accomplishments.

His tanned tawny cheeks and alluring almond eyes, half-hidden by magnificent lashes, faced up at God, "Lord, You know mortals smoke hashish. Shoot up horse--beg Your pardon--heroin. Sniff coke and crak, swallow uppers and downers--and all those pretty colors in between.

"Omniscient that You are, You are aware that they drink or dope themselves to death, or smoke to waste, or eat themselves to the grave."

He took a deep breath. "Men mortals whore and women mortals adulterate. Men fornicate with men and women with each other--and You must know--that today sex before wedlock is free and as common as promiscuous sex in the institution of marriage."

The clouds hovered, undecided, above Charlie's blown skull. Satan saw that this time Charlie hardly noticed the gloom ingest him, and Satan felt a stronger squeamishness, and a burst of anger at His endless unease. He shut His eyes stiffly, then opened them briskly.

"Lord, jails are so full they're spilling over trash back into the streets. Policemen, lawyers, politicians, doctors," he hesitated some, "people of the cloth, are turning their views elsewhere--"

"What are You getting at?" God roared, above comatose Charlie with the smouldering joint still locked in his fingers.

"Your churches are half-filled on Sundays. My churches--the bars and casinos and dives--are packed every day and are worse than the jails at night. To one of Your temples there is a thousand of Mine, Lord.

"What I'm getting at?" Satan glanced at a careening Charlie, and behind His back He crossed His long, manicured fingers. "I should be getting more than I bargained for, Lord. I mean there's no distinction between down there and up here any more. It should of been like too much for one of Me to handle. But, Lord, it ain't!

"Something, somewhere along the line is going wrong. People aren't trespassing, aren't violating the Law, out of simple spite or ignorance or disregard for guilt. Remorse they suffer, but they're rationalizing it out these days. Transgression is just one more abstract concept added to the long list of paradoxes We've been ladling out to them through the millennia. Irrelevant to the educated, is what I'm getting at. And the world is more exposed to sophistication today than ever before.

Or maybe," He tossed the bate, "just maybe now, Somebody is not doing Their share of the work."

"Are You accusing Me of abstention?"

A lethal violet fringe sprayed static electricity into the air around. Sand devils hopped and danced, whirling over the stuporous naked bodies. Then wind gushed by, the wake of the crossing of something vast. Out at the distant horizon ascended a monstrous tidal swell amassing into an alp.

Spikes drove into Satan's back, smashing the breath out of Him. Not too far off, clouds and water assimilated in grim platinum oneness, a drab press of sea and sky.

Charlie, head flung back, jaw agape, whined like a struck dog, a sound Satan had never heard before.

He's had it, Satan thought. Poor Charlie.

There's no stopping Him now. His ego is the biggest, and He's gonna blow it, along with stoned Charlie. Got to buy time, or I'll forfeit'im: The one and only soul in true conflict between Good and Evil, traditionally legitimate, not yet lost to titular and perfunctory worship or indifference. A last chance to revamp afresh My realm--blown.

"Lord," Satan said, His voice a sibilant whisper, "this mortal is a prize unlike any other."

"What are You talking about?" The skies resounded. "He's getting high, like all the others, isn't he? What's so special about Charlie Emanuel Woodsmith? I am going to strike them all down."

"I don't care about the rest. They aren't coming down below."

"They are certainly not destined for Paradise."

"But Charlie, Lord, may be."

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Satan scooped sand and dumped it on His nakedness. "I've been trying to tell You all along. There're more people dying today yet the souls I get get fewer and fewer. And I'd wager same thing's happening in Paradise."

"Well, the last century has been lean. I thought they strayed Your way. There must be millions unaccounted..."

"Billions! Earthquakes and floods in Asia and the Americas, famines and epidemics in Africa, skirmishes and sub-wars everywhere--"

"Purgatory?"

"Nope. I checked."

"Then where?" God asked, and the southerly wind blew.

"Since the end of the Second Great War, hitting peak in the sixties and levelling off in the early seventies, some matured force tampered with clear-cut Good and Evil, Lord."

"With Creation? The Rules had been set down long before that."

"You know that and I know it. But could those black holes--that 'horizon of events'--they discovered recently, and that babel about flower power, could they be sucking'em up?"

Satan glanced at wavering Charlie. "What happens if they stop crediting Us, deify Jung, the media, Sagan, The Physics of Immortality? How can faith and fear abide in the face of this avalanche of enlightenment, this flash-flood of knowledge and exposure to everything that once had been only Our secrets? Why don't they burn scientists, and journalists, Lord, any more?"

"I AM THAT I AM."

The sea rose and rushed in great heaves and the earth wavered and shimmied like so much flab at the utterance of this Truth. The clouds convoluted in gigantic flashing orbs. They eclipsed the sun and filled the sky to the azimuth.

"It's awful!" Charlie screamed.

Satan felt him gasp, wince and shake uncontrollably. Hold on, babe, He egged on silently, a little longer, don't turn into a pillar of salt on me now.

Then He turned to God, "Ok, ok. But what if?"

"You know the answer."

"No!" Satan's face caricatured, aghast.

God nodded and the ground under Charlie throbbed.

"Oh, poor Kid. Not the Wood again."

"Would you prefer Nemesis, the Great Deluge or Sodom and Gomorrah all over again? Religion is sanctioned as a proviso of faith. No faith, no religion. No religion...man is next. Are You ready for man on the loose?"

"Are We?" Lucifer let out a dragging moan.

"So, Charlie is the only and last vacillating believer."

"The only honest of the faith left, my sources say. But he's trying to get bad. You witnessed it."

Satan's grits braced, "Let him battle it out alone, Lord, not like the other One. See whose gonna win the tug-o-war inside this final one fellah, clean and straight like. I'll take back what I said, about Whose not doin' Their share."

"Teacher, isn't he, a language teacher? Has a way with children? Unpretentious chap, a bit idiosyncratic. Doesn't quite fit in with his peers?"

"That's him. A deal?"

"Of course."

"Shake on it?"

God eyeballed Satan.

The havens smiled. The clouds scattered. The summer afternoon sun reigned once more over a beach sprinkled with bronze bodies. Charlie stopped boring his hands into the sand to buttress against another quake. He squinted up at the sun and realized that it must have all been a hallucination.

He looked around. The fiery-haired, violet-eyed angel waived to him from an alcove beneath the precipice, blew a kiss, and made the sign for Victory.

Charlie chagrined at the bounce of the angel's haunches, rubbed his stinging eyes and saw that he was waving back at an empty space of shore.

"Never again," he said and collapsed.

He lay curled up, napping. He dreamed that he was playing five card stud with two sleazy-looking dudes, one wore a robe of silk the other vaunted the Spock look, and that his hand was as rotten as a hand can be.

There came a disturbed expression on Charlie's face, an impression of having been cheated from his joy and of having had his peace left naked to the world.

End