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24. God cannot say, 'I dissolve myself'

'It's very good of you,' said the hare, 'still speaking to me, now that you're God. Do I have to *Thee* and *Thou* you?'

'Leave that to the Book. As long as you don't keep interrupting.'

Anton L. was sitting outside the expensive antiques shop, the contents of which he had chopped up for firewood during the winter. A stone Rococo garden seat — probably not entirely genuine — had naturally not gone on the fire. Sonja, the angel, had carried it out of the shop and placed it in front of the window, so that Anton L. could sit on it. He was sitting on the bench, legs crossed. The angel was standing behind him and had unfolded a purple nimbus.

'Now that I am God,' said Anton L., 'or rather, now that I know I'm God, I always was, of course, I will create a new mankind.'

'I should think about that very carefully,' said the hare. 'Anyway, when? Right away?'

'I have thought it over —'

'Excuse me if I do interrupt you, God,' said the hare. 'A new mankind? You think the world can't manage without mankind? You're still pretty anthropocentric, aren't you? It's obvious you were only promoted a short while ago.'

'What have you got against man? I loved — no, I didn't love my fellow men. I even hated them, but I loved *mankind* deeply, with all my heart.'

'Why only humankind?'

'I don't understand,' said Anton L.

'Humankind's a pretty pathetic object for such a deep love. Life, life as such, now that I could understand: humankind and harekind and rhinoceroskind and birdkind, fishkind, wormkind, antkind, infusoriakind, treekind, grasskind, fernkind, mosskind — to love all those, now that I could understand. But humankind? Was that depraved lot worth it?'

'I'm afraid you just don't understand?'

'No,' said the hare, 'I don't understand. I never did understand why so much fuss was made about the salvation of a few fools.'

'You forget the great deeds of mankind.'

'Great deeds?' said the hare. 'Shooting us, mainly.'

'End of argument,' said Anton L. 'God does not argue. I have resolved to create mankind anew. Anew! That's the important bit.'

'Best of luck,' said the hare.

'I will make a new beginning. Tomorrow, at the hour when I command the sun to rise, I will rematerialise mankind.'

'They are in for a big surprise.'

'With the help of the Book, that is by my own power, be it noted, I will carry out this act. Despite their abominable past, I will give them, mankind that is, the opportunity I have had myself and which, as you must agree, I have made use of. I remember 1945. Then one part of mankind was faced with a similar

situation. Much had been destroyed. For a while — at that time only for a while! — they became peace-loving, more spiritually inclined. Now they will find a world that has been completely destroyed. Their peace-loving and spiritual tendencies will endure, especially since I will deprive mankind of certain characteristics which have turned out to be unfavourable.'

'Don't let them have guns.'

'Not only no guns, they will be denied access to all the forces of nature that were harmful.'

'A splendid idea, in theory.'

'Why in theory?'

'It seems to me,' said the hare, 'that what you have in mind is a bunch of vegetarians going round in hand-woven sandals reading uplifting tracts —'

'They won't do *you* any harm.'

'They will tell *you* to get stuffed. They had another God before who had their best interests at heart and they told him to get stuffed.'

'I've thought of that too. What I will rematerialise will be mankind perfected. I'll spare them the pain of all the different stages of development they should go through, I'll let them off the hard school of the mistakes they really ought to make. I will awaken mankind in its final, purified state.'

'May I make a suggestion?'

'Yes?'

'I'd have a look at a few samples first. Not bring them all back at once.'

'That is perhaps not a bad idea.'

'If I were you,' said the hare, 'before I scattered the whole of mankind over this unfortunate planet, I'd have a few appear this evening, here, before your throne.'

'This evening?'

'Then you could still change your mind.'

Uncertain, Anton L. looked round at Sonja, the angel, but it, holding on to the nimbus, just turned its head to one side; its resplendent body shone out from the wide-open robe.

'All right then,' said Anton L.

A tremor shook Luitpold Allee. The building in front of which Anton L. was sitting billowed out, the façade burst, and bricks and tiles rained down. However the angel held its nimbus like a tent over Anton L. and the hare, and the bricks and tiles bounced off it.

The earth opened up. Out of a fissure that ran along the middle of the street rose a human being with its feet attached directly to its knees; to make up for that, it had arms as long as a boa constrictor. It felt around with its hands and staggered straight back into the fissure. Clearly it was blind.

'Just a minute, it's falling back in,' said Anton L.

But it didn't fall back in. Another was coming out of the crack and pushed it out of the way. The second was transparent, had no hair and a head the size of a water butt in which a brownish brain could be seen pulsating. The brain was constantly secreting a fluid which dripped down inside its body and was excreted through the feet. The second human grabbed the first by the arm and started to suck at it.

A third human emerged from the fissure. It was large and powerful and moved on hairs, like a caterpillar; when it turned round, they could see that it was as thin as a sheet of paper. The fourth was a dwarf, but had a male

member the size of a cannon, three times bigger than it was. It had difficulty getting its arms round its penis and it could only keep its balance by leaning back. When the dwarf saw Sonja's resplendent body, its penis shot straight up in the air, high as a tree. The dwarf fell flat on its face. The penis went right through the middle of the paper-thin one that went on hairs. By now the one with the long arms had sensed that someone was sucking at its arm, but could not see who it was. It started to swing its arms round and round. The transparent one hung on and went round and round in the air too.

A fifth came out. It had such a voluminous fold of flesh on its neck it could wrap itself in it like a cloak. A sixth had a body covered in fungi, a seventh a mouth like a leech. The eighth had no skin and no bones; it moved by dissolving into a puddle, trickling a bit this way or that then building up again into a kind of soft, red cheese. The one with the leech-mouth slurped it up, then burst. The bits formed new leech-men.

The next ones looked as if they had been made out of wire. Then shadows fluttered out of the crack, like smoke, some light-coloured, some dark. They mingled and spun round in long swirls over the ground. Then came a red maw with white teeth.

The maw stuck out a tongue, big as a flag, and some of the shadows got stuck to it. A long, white grub made of fat, the size of a small airship, came out of the fissure and regarded the scene with fourteen impudent eyes.

'Some . . . ' said Anton L.

'Some what?' asked the hare, who was hiding under the seat and looking out through Anton L.'s legs.

'Some error must have crept into my calculations,' said Anton L.

'On the contrary, your calculations are perfectly correct. You just didn't really know what the result of your cosmic multiplication would be.'

Anton L. gave the angel a signal. The angel unfolded another nimbus and threw it over the pack that had poured out of the fissure. The nimbus inflated to a sphere, sucking everything up inside it, then reduced to the size of a goldfish bowl in which the wriggling and shoving, coupling and slurping went on in shrunken format, but clear and distinct, as if under a magnifying glass. The angel handed the sphere to Anton L., who held it in front of him in the palm of his hand and looked at it.

The hare came out from under the seat.

'I almost feel sorry for you,' said the hare. 'Even I didn't think it would be that awful.'

Anton L. said nothing. He glanced at the angel, but it was holding the nimbus again and turned its head slightly to one side. It was looking along a precise tangent to Anton L.'s head.

Anton L. stood up and threw the sphere back into the crack in the road.

'What now?' said the hare.

'Can God dissolve himself?' asked Anton L.

'I don't think so,' said the hare.

'I don't really think so, either,' said Anton L. 'God can't say, "I dissolve myself." What would happen if God were to say:

"I — dis — solve — my — self —" ?'