

The Lone and Dreary World

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But Adam and Eve wept for having come out of the garden, their first abode. . . And Adam said to Eve, "Look at thine eyes, and at mine, which afore beheld angels in heaven. . . But now we do not see as we did: our eyes have become flesh.

—The First Book of Adam and Eve

HALFWAY UP THE MOUNTAIN Adam planted his legs against the slant of the hill. He took a moment to catch his breath. He didn't have the strength he'd had in the Garden of Eden. He didn't have the spirit, either. He took up a handful of leaves from the blanket of dead foliage under his feet. He made a fist and the leaves crackled into fragments. The trees in the valley were bare. The fruits were gone. The flowers had withered. Each night had grown colder than the night before.

He'd left the camp early that morning, at first daylight, without rekindling the fire. Eve lay asleep when he left, beautiful and serene. He didn't want to speak to her. He set out along the edge of a stream, walking toward the foothills. Lucifer's hosts were swirling in his head like a cloud of flies. "Go!" the voices said. "Fly!" Adam did not hold his ears and rebuke them. He walked toward the mountain. There was a ledge halfway up. "Fly," the voices said, and Adam followed them. From the ledge he would be able to see the world as God did—from above, from a distance.

He followed the course of the stream, up the mountain, to the ledge, where the water gurgled from a rock, pouring out like soft laughter from the earth. The sky above grew black as a great flock of birds flew overhead, flying south, fleeing the cold. It was the third flock he had seen in as many days.

"Go," the voices said. "Fly." Adam knelt at the fountain of water. He put his hand down in the opening, reaching in to his elbow. The water splashed around his arm, cool and quick. The cavity was barely bigger than his fist, but beyond its mouth, the opening was deep and wide. When the voices cried, "Watch out!" Adam jerked his arm from the fountain. He jumped to his feet and spun around, expecting to see Lucifer himself, expecting to hear the laughter of the hosts. But no one was there. He was alone. His heart pounded, and he was afraid.

In the Garden there had been no fear. In the Garden, all the days were the

same. Everything had been beautiful and safe. He and Eve had wandered for days at a time, among flowers and gentle animals and colorful trees so high they could see nothing but blue sky above. "It's beautiful," he would say to Eve, and she would answer, "It is." There was nothing more to say.

After they were cast out, Adam didn't know if the world was a dream or if the Garden had been a dream. He and Eve were wearing clothes. They were walking. He was ashamed. They walked in shame, as though they had been born walking, born out of the fallen earth. They had walked all day and all night, clinging to each other, too frightened to speak. They became tired, but they didn't know what tiredness was. They walked all day, walked even when it was dark, until they tripped on a stone and fell together in the darkness.

They'd clung to each other there in the cool dust, groping in the darkness, weeping. Eve had wept with her mouth on Adam's neck. Her tears had fallen on his shoulder. He put his mouth to hers. He put his hands inside her clothes. He didn't know what he was doing. She had clung to him tightly. She held him close, and for a moment he could hardly breathe.

When they awoke in the morning, there was no Garden behind them. The lush growth had disappeared. The top of the sky stretched high above them, chalky and immense. The horizon lay far in the distance. Then the voices, the tongues of Lucifer's hosts, had come like great winds. "What have you done?" they asked. "Why are you alone?" "Where will you go?" The voices had followed them for days, and after a while, Eve said she could shut them out. She learned how to do it, said she. But Adam hadn't learned, at least not completely. He heard them all the time. A few days later, the angel came and told them to make the sacrifice, but the angel didn't come back. God didn't come back either. Adam and Eve were alone, except for the voices.

"Go to the ledge," the voices had told him that morning. "Fly." So Adam came to the ledge.

The ledge overlooked the valley where Adam and Eve had built a thatched shelter. Beyond the valley was a staggering panorama of mountains, stretching on into the endless horizon. The valley had been green when they first came to it. There had been flowers among the thorns. There had been blossoms. For days they had been able to gather fruits, harvest stalks, and dig up roots. There had been enough to eat. But then the fruits rotted. The flowers withered.

Now Adam looked out from the ledge. The entire valley was brown with death, red with wounds, yellow with weakness. And the sky, the massive sky that bent itself over them like wings, was gray and misty, hiding them from the sun.

Adam stood at the ledge. "Fly," the voices said.

He knew he couldn't fly. The voices were lying to him, trying to deceive him. He took a stone and hurled it, watching it disappear into the vacant space below. A vision came to him, as vivid as a dream. He could see himself spread-eagled in the air, falling untouched and fearless. It was a beautiful feeling, just like the connectedness, the day-less-ness, he had felt in the Garden, the feeling of being joined to everything, whole and holy.

Sometimes at night, when the insects were so thick that he and Eve had to tie themselves into animal skins to sleep, Adam imagined the whole world disappearing, with nothing left but him and Eve, the two of them sewn up into all that remained, rapt in each other, the only goodness they had left from the Garden. Then the morning would come. He would wake to its cold, bright daylight, the songs of the birds reminding him that the world wasn't whole, reminding him that there was a piece for him, a piece for Eve, a separate piece for every creature.

He stood there on the ledge, like a man in a dream. He imagined the wind lifting him, calmly, until he was floating, until he was like a feather.

"Fly," Adam whispered.

"Adam? What are you doing?"

He turned. Eve stood behind him, by the fountain. She was steadying herself on the rock wall. She was breathing heavily and holding her belly. Neither of them knew when the baby would come.

Adam came back to himself. He came toward her, toward safer ground.

Her face was flushed. She was trying to catch her breath.

"Why did you follow me?" he asked.

"I woke up and you were gone."

"I didn't want to wake you."

"What are you doing?" she said. "You could have fallen. Is it the voices? I told you to shut them out. It's not that hard."

"I wanted to come up here so I could see the world the way God sees it."

"We're not in Eden anymore," Eve said. "We have to live with that."

"Eve, everything is dying—because of us, because of our choice. We're going to die. He warned us, and now it's happening."

"What about the sacrifice?" Eve said. "Why would the angel tell us to make the sacrifice if we're going to die?"

"I take that lamb in my arms, Eve, and I slit its throat. We burn the fat on the altar, and we eat the meat, and you know what I think about? I think about death. Death is going to eat us up, just like we eat the sacrifice. Every day we're farther from heaven. The animals are hiding. The birds are flying away. We don't have anything to eat." He came to her. He touched her belly. "You've seen the animals after they're born. If the mother doesn't eat, if she doesn't stay strong and have good milk, the babies die, too."

"We have to pass through this," Eve said.

"Our baby will never know the Garden."

"Why would Father put us here to die?" Eve asked. She rested her hand on the sphere of her belly. "Our choice has to have good in it. Why can't you believe that?"

"Have you forgotten?" Adam asked her. "The animals sang to us. God spoke to us. Now, I make the sacrifices. I say the prayers. But He doesn't come. He's never coming."

"What can we do?" Eve whispered. "We made our choice."

She was near him now, leaning into his chest. He kissed her hair. When they'd had plenty to eat and the nights were warm, when he first started making the sacrifices, her touch had been enough to make him forget. When he believed God was coming, that God was only a little late, she was the only thing out of Eden that he needed. But now, he put his arms around her, and he still felt alone because of the choice they had made together.

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It was colder that evening. Adam put more limbs and brush on the roof. He built a bigger fire. They cooked a stew of vegetables, and when it was dark, they lay in their blankets of skins. The cold had driven away the insects.

Long after Eve was asleep, Adam lay awake. The voices came, filling his head with thoughts. He stepped out into the night. He looked up at the moon resting low in the sky, full and yellow. He began walking, following the voices. When he got to the ledge, Lucifer was waiting, sitting on the edge of the precipice. He was beautiful, bodiless, naked and translucent.

Adam sat beside him on the cliff.

"I've been thinking about you," Lucifer said. "What went through your mind this morning as you gazed down from this ledge?"

Adam looked out into the darkness. "A feeling," he answered.

"What did the feeling say?"

"You mean, what did the voices say?"

"I don't care about the voices," Lucifer said. "It's you I want to know about."

"Sitting here this morning," Adam said, "I felt like jumping."

Lucifer didn't speak.

"I saw an elk fall from a height like this," Adam said. "It killed him."

"Do you want to die?"

Adam looked at Lucifer. "I want to return to my Father."

"You know how Father is," Lucifer said. "You can't do it outright. It has to be sacred, like the sacrifice, or he won't accept it."

"I know what the sacrifice means," Adam said. "It means we're dying."

"You're fallen," Lucifer said. "Just like me. That's all. You're not dying."

Adam returned his gaze to the darkness. "God keeps his promises," he said.

"Listen to me. I know your future. It's happened before, on other worlds. You're not going to die. Your children will grow up, as numberless as the stars, and they'll never know the God you knew in Eden. They'll create their own gods, patterned after the animals and the planets and a world of other things you can't even imagine yet. They'll worship their bodies. They'll thirst for blood. They'll make kings out of murderers. They'll thrive and fight and wallow in sin. And they'll break your heart. Life stretches before you, longer than the sky, deeper than the sea."

"I don't believe you," Adam said. "You're a liar."

"I'm telling the truth."

"I don't know what to do," Adam said.

"Do what you felt this morning," Lucifer said. "Jump. Kill yourself. Punish God for punishing you."

Adam turned to Lucifer. "Why does it matter to you?" he asked.

Lucifer's expression turned grave. "I want your body," he said. "I want to take it and use it, and when I'm finished, I want to tear it to shreds. I hate everything that's physical, everything that reminds me of Him."

"What about Eve?" Adam asked. "If I kill myself, what will happen to her?"

"Give me your body," Lucifer said, "and I'll take care of Eve."

Adam returned his gaze to the darkness. "I don't believe you. I don't trust you."

"You're wise," Lucifer said. "'Never trust anyone,' that's what I say. But the earth isn't dying. Winter's coming, that's all. It's going to get very cold, but you won't die. You have a long life ahead, a long and sad life, unless you do what I say. I'll be with you here forever, singing songs of despair. When your children are drowning in lust, when you're old and buried alive in sin, I'll come to you, and I'll remind you that I predicted it all."

"What happens if I kill myself?" Adam asked. "Is that the end?"

"No! It's only the beginning. Jump from here, and you'll land in the arms of your Father. You can see him again, right now. Death is the doorway. Jump right now, and you can beg your Father on your hands and knees to never leave you again."

Adam closed his eyes. He wanted to be with his Father. The thought nearly broke his heart.

"You can be with Him," Lucifer said, "or you can stay here, with a liar like me." His voice was suddenly distant and forlorn. "It's your choice," he said. "It's always been your choice."

Adam opened his eyes. He turned to look at the devil, to see the liar. He was ready to believe anything. But Lucifer was gone, and Adam was alone.

An icy wind blew.

The night was empty.

There were no voices.

Adam looked up at the moon. It hung above him like a hole in the veil between earth and heaven. He wanted to believe Lucifer. He wanted to believe that his God was only one leap away.

In the moonlit valley below lay the silver ribbon of a river, the silhouette of the mountains in the distance. Above the mountains was a dome of distant, icy stars. Adam stared into the blackness of the valley, longing to see the thatched shelter where Eve lay asleep. There was so much blackness, so much land below, so much emptiness above. The cold wind made him numb.

He tried to remember the Garden. In all the days since the Garden, he had never felt so alone. He felt it in his chest like a stone on his heart. He tried to remember God's face, but all he could remember was the whiteness, the terrible

glory of His presence when God had cast them out. Adam whispered into the night. "Maybe there was no Garden," he said. He waited a long time, letting the sound of his words drift into the darkened sky. "Maybe there was no God," he said, and his words sounded hollow in his own ears.

He stood. He toed the edge of the cliff. He wasn't afraid.

He wanted to hear the voices again. He didn't want to be alone. He wanted to fly. He lifted his arms like wings. He stood with his feet together, his arms outstretched. He closed his eyes and tilted his head toward the sky. He remembered the elk that had fallen from the cliff. He remembered the passion in Eve's kisses. He remembered the feeling of warm blood on his hands as he sacrificed the lamb, and the sound of the lamb's pathetic cries. He stood there, waiting to be lifted into the air, waiting to be taken into the arms of God. But nothing happened. The wind blew icy cold, and he was still alone.

He believed God's word. God had said he would surely die. But no power lifted his feet from the earth. There was no magic to unburden him of his choice.

As Adam turned to walk down the mountain, to go back to Eve, to face the fate God planned for him, the voices rose once more, like howling winds. They told him to fly, and he shut them out. They told him he was alone, and he shut them out. They told him he would live a long life of emptiness, apart from his God, and he shut them out. He walked down the mountain, through cold darkness, listening only to the sound of his own breathing. And when he reached the valley, he heard soft rhythms rising from the earth, still and strong, as the earth waited each moment on the will of God.