



Big Kids' Fairytales

YEVGENY ZAMYATIN

BIG KIDS' FAIRYTALES

Yevgeny Zamyatin

translated by Kai Swanson-Dale

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

And now we come to the book that nobody asked for: *Big Kids' Fairytales* (1922) by Yevgeny Zamyatin.

This isn't really much of a translation—as I neither speak, nor read, nor understand Russian—but more of an embellished paraphrase¹ of...

But I won't say what.

Let us say only that if someone who actually knows what they are doing comes along and brings out their own version, there will be no complaints from me. Indeed, there may already be another version in English, but if so, I haven't found it.

Why there is even this version may be explained something like this:

While reading the Yevgeny Zamyatin page on Wikipedia, I came across the assertion that this esteemed Russian had written several short stories, in fairy tale format, in one of which “the mayor” decides that to make everyone happy, he must make everyone equal.

“The mayor then forces everyone, himself included, to live in a big barrack[s], then to shave their heads to be equal to the bald, and then to become mentally disabled” in order to make the smartest equal to the dumbest.²

¹ Or, in the style of Alfred Jarry, a pataphrase.

² Quoted text from Wikipedia.

The plot, says Wikipedia, is very similar to the earlier *The New Utopia* (1891) by Jerome K. Jerome, as well as the later *Harrison Bergeron* (1961) by Kurt Vonnegut.³ And indeed, one immediately sees the resemblance.

Unhelpfully, Wikipedia does not say what this story is called, and after some digging, the name “The Last Tale of Phita” turns up. This, turning up nothing more, in turn leads to a search of Wikipedia’s Zamyatin bibliography, of which *Большим детям сказки* (Google translated as “big kids tales”) seems the most promising. A scan of the table of contents on a Russian website reveals the сказка of Фиту—Fitu—and since there are four of them, presumably one of them is the “Last”. Success!

Unfortunately, it is still in Russian, a language that, as I already mentioned, I do not understand.

But I really wanted to read it, so, as one does, I presumed to write it myself.

The story referenced by Wikipedia, then, turns out to be “The Last Tale of Fita”, collected in “Tales of Fita”, collected in *Big Kids’ Fairytales*, the volume you are holding now.

³ Vonnegut is a favorite of mine, and that story a particular favorite, for the absurdity depicted in all its ridiculousness, as Vonnegut does so well. (Note that a very similar subplot appears in one of the later chapters of Vonnegut’s book *The Sirens of Titan* (1959).) However, I doubt Vonnegut had the chance to read Zamyatin’s story, as even I have only just been able to find it, and both translations are recent.

Enjoy... and read with a grain of salt.
Or, like Fita, with a bottle of ink.

—KSD

8 January 2020
Ashland, Oregon

THE IVANS (1920)

There was once a village known as Ivanik, in which all the peasants were called Ivan, differentiated only by their nicknames: Self-Eating Ivan (he chewed his ear in his sleep), Frenzied Ivan, Big-Nosed Ivan, Salty-Eared Ivan, Addle-Brained Ivan, One-Upman Ivan, and countless others, but One-Upman Ivan was the most important. While other people sowed and harrowed the fields, the Ivans lay belly up and spat at the sky, to see who could spit the farthest.

“Oh, you Ivans! You could be growing wheat!”

The Ivans just spat through their teeth: *tsirk!*

“Have you heard about the new lands? There they can really grow wheat, oh yes: highest quality, and grains the size of cucumbers.”

But the Ivans just kept spitting, seeing who could spit farther than whom—and they would have lain about that way forever, except that good luck fell to the Ivans, God knows where from. A patter of hooves, and a column of dust rose along the road—a rider on horseback was heading toward Ivanik, bringing an announcement: Any Ivans who wanted to go to the new lands should please step forward.

The Ivans drew the sign of the cross and grabbed hold of the horse’s tail with all their strength. Off they rushed! The landscape was a blur: a church, a field, a field, a church.

The rider let them down. There was no housing, nothing, for sixty-five miles around—they were in a

bald patch, in the middle of which stood only nettles, big around as bottles and so tall your hat would fall off if you looked at the top: and if you got pricked, the blister would be as big as a fifty kopek coin. The Ivans checked the soil: it was black as pitch, rich as cow's butter.

"Well, brothers, set up camp. This must be the place!" The best land there was, the highest quality.

They sat in a circle and chewed crusts of bread with salt. Now they were thirsty—they traipsed back and forth, but there was no water to be found: the only thing to do was dig their own well.

They got to it. The earth was loose and light; clods flew. One-Upman Ivan stopped digging and squinted.

"Brothers," he said, "there *has* to be water here: sweet water, not like ours..."

Just then their iron struck stone—clink! It was a sturdy rock, and when they turned it over, water burbled up. They scooped it out with ladles and drank: cold, clean water—like water anywhere.

One-Upman Ivan spat through his teeth: *tsirk!*

"You can get water like this in Ivanik, as much as you want. Dig deeper. There should be really high quality water down there somewhere."

So they dug and dug—until nightfall they kept digging, to the same result. That night they tossed and turned under the nettles, and went back to digging in the morning. Some worms crawled along in the well's eerie depths: filthy, naked, pink, fat-faced.

They continued to dig, thoughtfully, while Ivan pestered them. He was up top, where they could barely hear him:

“Deeper, brothers, keep going! Push on a little more!”

Soon they reached some tougher soil that their shovels couldn't break. Furthermore, the water hindered them, a decent amount of water—and it was still exactly the same as the water in Ivanik.

They took a crowbar and gave the soil a knock, and heard in response a muffled echo, as from a barrel—a cave, maybe. They knocked it again, harder, and now it began to rumble. Everything was coming down: the water, and rubble, and clods of dirt, and all their tools. Eyes blinded, ears deafened, they barely held on.

The Ivans rubbed their eyes, looked beneath their feet... By the power of the Cross! There was a hole—and in the hole, blue sky. They looked up: there too, far away, blue sky shone faintly. By the power of the Cross: they had pierced the earth right through!

Struck dumb, hats in hand, they made a break for home: Self-Eating Ivan on Frenzied Ivan's shoulders, Frenzied Ivan on Big-Nosed Ivan's, Big-Nosed Ivan on Salty-Eared Ivan's, Salty-Eared Ivan on Addle-Brained Ivan's, until they were all out.

On reaching the surface, the first thing they did was beat the hell out of One-Upman Ivan. Then they collected their belongings and headed back to Ivanik. Without water, without tools, what else could they

do? The only consolation they brought with them was a pinch of dirt from the new land.

They showed it to their neighbors, but their neighbors did not believe them: "A likely story. If there was a land such as that, would you really come back?"

And as for how they had pierced the earth right through, there was no way they could talk about that: they would be laughed at. So the Ivans were branded as liars, and even today no one believes that they went to new lands. But they did.

THE DEVOURER (1920)

Everything shook—the stars fell from above like ripe pears. The vault of heaven had become empty, like a field in autumn: the only sound was the wind, whipping over the yellow stubble uneasily, while two black beetle-men slowly crawled along the edge of a long road. So, in the same fashion, crawled the sun and the moon in the empty sky, a sky black as the velvet robes in a Good Friday service: black, so that the Resurrection would shine brighter.

That's when the Devourer, Chryapalo, began making his way across the ground on stumpy, bear-like feet: first on the right foot, then on the left. His dead boar's head was white, squinty-eyed, hairless, except at the back, where it hung in disheveled locks to the shoulder, like a pilgrim. And on his belly was a face, like a human face, with its eyes squinting. Where the navel is on people was its mouth—gaping.

In a winter field, old man Kochetyg was plowing. His trousers were motley, his shirt was homespun canvas, his hair was tied with a string so the strands would not fall into his eyes. He looked into the sky: horror! But still he had to plow. What an affair.

Chryapalo ran into the old man from behind: his eyes were just for show, he couldn't open them, so he was always running into things.

“Who are you?” he asked the old man—asked the gaping mouth of Chryapalo's belly, where the navel is on people. “Why are you in my way?”

He opened his other, boar's, mouth—gulp!—and swallowed the old man whole. Only his shoes remained.

Barely audible, as if coming from underground, the old man's voice answered: "But what about bread? There won't be any bread..."

And Chryapalo's belly said: "I don't give a brass farthing." The old man was gone.

In a clearing, the little girl Olenka was picking flowers—the first bellflowers of spring. Her bare feet flashed, white between the bellflowers, and she, like a golden bell herself, burst forth into song: about her mother-in-law, about her dashing husband—so moving!

Chryapalo stumbled toward Olenka. "Why are you in the way?" he demanded, but without waiting for an answer—gulp! One bare foot protruded.

From the depths, Olenka only managed to shout: "A song..."

"I don't give a brass farthing," said Chryapalo's belly, as he swallowed the last white heel.

Wherever Chryapalo passed, he left empty—the only thing to show he had been there, piles of excrement. In that way, every last person on earth would have been devoured, except that there was a man—a peddler from the city of Yaroslavl—and his surname was some ordinary one, either Petrov or Sidorov, nothing special, but he was sharp-witted.

The peddler noticed that Chryapalo never turned around, he always ran straight forward—it seemed to

be impossible for him to turn around! And with a smirk, the peddler followed quietly behind Chryapalo. It wasn't much fun, of course, and it was hard to breathe, being knee-deep in the piles of excrement, but on the other hand, it was a sure way to survive.

Others saw the peddler and realized what he was doing. Now, behind Chryapalo, it looked like a religious procession taking place. Only people who were complete idiots did not rush behind Chryapalo to hide.

Chryapalo quickly finished off those idiots, and without any more food he died, of course. And the people of Yaroslavl began to prosper. They thanked the Lord God: the land had become fertile from the excrement, so the harvest would be good.

ARABS (1920)

On the island of Buyan there is a river. On this shore live our people—red men—and on that, their people—Arabs.

This morning, an Arab was caught in the river. So good, so good: fillet to go around. Soup was cooked, chops fried—yes, with onions, with mustard, with a bit of salt... All were fed: the Lord had provided!

But hardly had our people lain down to take a nap when, yelling, screeching, they were dragged away by damnable Arabs! From pillar to post, and already they were set to be skinned and cooked as shish kebabs on the coals.

Our people—across the river—cried: “Ah, you Arabs are cannibals! Just like they say.”

“What of it?” they replied.

“What’s wrong with you? Devouring our red skins... aren’t you ashamed to eat us?”

“Have you not made chops of us? Whose bones lie over there?”

“Well, yes, needless to say, you fools. We ate that Arab. And because of that, you’re going to eat us? Fine. Go ahead. You devils will be fried in the next world!”

And those Arabs, with their white eyes, just grinned. But find out for yourself! What a shameless people. In a word: Arabs. Born into the world as dogs!

THE ASTRONOMER (1920)

Chaldea sat with logarithms. For three and thirty years he sat with logarithms, and in the thirty fourth he came up with a strange pipe: for through the pipe, it was possible to see the whole sky at close range, as if it were only across the street. Everything was clearly visible: what kind of inhabitants they had on the stars, and what their signs said, and what kind of cabmen drove their carriages. It turned out that everything was exactly the same as what we have—pretty boring. Chaldea waved his hand: Oh well... — and burst into flames.

Very quickly, a rumor ran the rounds about Chaldea's pipe, and people descended on Chaldea's house: they were so eager to look at the stars, and see what kind of inhabitants they had there. But the pipe was kept close: there was no easy access to it, and everyone had to wait their turn in line.

The turn came to a cheerful girl named Katyushka, whose eyes were as blue as cornflowers. Enchanted by her eyes, Chaldea fell to the white, moonlit grass—nothing, either on Earth or through his strange pipe, could be sweeter than Katyushka's lips.

Katyushka took her turn and cried in delight: "Oh, what a sky! Look at the sky!"

"Yes, I have seen it," said Chaldea. "There is nothing to look at."

"No, you must look."

But Katyushka was tricky: she brought the pipe to Chaldea and gave him the wrong end—not the end of the beholder, but the other, where the glasses were small.

Chaldea looked: God knew why, but the sky was very far away! The moon was as small as his thumbnail, and a golden spider wove a golden web and purred under his nose like a cat. The sky was like a dark spring meadow, on which the fiery flowers of Kupala trembled, azure, scarlet, hot: you had but to reach out a hand, and the innumerable treasures of Kupala would be yours.

More came back to Chaldea: he remembered when he was little, on Maundy Thursday, and people came home from standing at the service, bringing the still-burning candles.

Immediately, thirty-three years of logarithms were lifted from his shoulders. Tears came to his eyes, and Chaldea bowed at the feet of the cheerful girl:

“Well, Katyushka, I will never forget this, for you have taught me how to look.”

THE CHURCH OF GOD (1920)

Ivan decided to set up a church of God, the kind that would make the sky hot and the devil feel sick, and gather glory from around the world.

Now, it's well known that to set up a church, in order to build the building, you need a decent amount of money. So Ivan went to hunt for money for his church of God.

In the evening, Ivan sat in a ravine under a bridge. An hour passed, another—hooves pounded overhead, a troika rolled across the bridge: a merchant was passing.

Ivan whistled—and how he could whistle! The horses rose up on their hind legs, and the coachman hit the ground with a thunk, but the merchant remained in the tarantass out of fear, shaking like an aspen leaf.

Ivan put the coachman to rest and proceeded to the merchant: "Give me your money."

"I swear by God," said the merchant, "what money?"

"Why, money for the church, you fool: I want to build a church. Come on."

The merchant swore by God: "I will build it myself."

Ah, what—build it himself? What do you think about that?

Ivan started a fire in the bushes, drew the sign of the cross—and began to roast the foot of the

merchant in the fire. The merchant could not stand it. He revealed the hiding place of his money: in the right boot, one hundred thousand, and in the left, one hundred more.

Ivan bowed to the earth: "Glory to the Lord! Now there will be a church."

And he threw earth on the bonfire. But the merchant gasped, drew his legs to his stomach, and expired. Well, what can you do: God is for real.

Ivan buried both of them, the repose of his soul in mind, and betook himself to the city, where he hired masons, joiners, icon painters, goldsmiths. And on the very spot where the merchant and his coachman were buried, Ivan erected the church—greater than the Ivan the Great Bell Tower in Moscow. The crosses touched the clouds, the blue domes were painted with stars, the bells rang soft, pleasing, and iridescent: it was the ultimate church.

Ivan gave the cry: "God's church is ready, and all are welcome."

People gathered by the thousands. The bishop himself arrived in a golden carriage, and the priests—forty of them—and the deacons—forty, one from each of the old churches in Moscow. And with these arrivals, the service began, with the bishop pointing his finger at Ivan.

"Why," he asked, "do you have a bad smell here? Tell the old women to leave—tell them that they're not at home on the couch, they are in the church of God."

Ivan went, he told the old women, and they left the church; but no: it still stunk! The bishop blinked: all forty priests were talking at once. “What’s wrong? That didn’t help at all.”

The bishop turned to the forty deacons, who waved forty censers: but the smell still hung in the air—you could hardly breathe—and it didn’t smell like old women, but a dead man! The stench was unbearable, they just couldn’t stand it, so they left the church—the deacons in silence, and the priests backwards: only the bishop stayed put on the rug in the middle of the church, with Ivan in front him—neither alive nor dead.

The bishop looked at Ivan—right through him to his core—and, without saying a word, went out.

And Ivan remained behind, alone in his church: everyone had gone. They could not stand the smell of the dead men.

BYAKA AND KAKA (1920)

Duck down was drying over the peasant's stove, and infesting some of that fluff were Byaka and Kaka. They were like black cockroaches, only bigger, with two hands, two feet, and one tongue—a very long tongue: when they were little, they had swaddled themselves in their own tongue, instead of wearing diapers.

Such a nice scene, the peasant praying at night—he bowed to the icon of the Three Handed Mary, with Byaka and Kaka behind him, at the peasant's back. In the afternoon, he swept dust from the hut, and on patronal holidays, he wore his new red shirt. And it was still before Maslenitsa—things could not have been better.

Now it was Maslenitsa, and the peasant brought booze: such booze! It turned everything upside down. His face got all smeared with food, things slipped from his grip and smashed to smithereens, and he stumbled, on his own, back to his hut, with all eyes upon him. Now crawling along on his belly, he collapsed next to a guttering candle. Its flame danced: it was about to catch his shirt on fire.

Byaka and Kaka rushed with all speed to extinguish the candle.

“Yes, let me go: I'll put it out.”

“No, let me go...”

“I love the peasant more; but you, not so much, I know!”

“No, I love him more, Byaka!”

“What, I’m Byaka? Then you—you’re Kaka! Can that be right?”

A blow to the mustache, another to the snout, and they were rolling around on the floor. Meanwhile, the flame leapt from the guttering candle to the shirt, from the shirt to the peasant, from the peasant to the hut. And so, the peasant and the hut and Byaka and Kaka became, all together, one soot.

THURSDAY (1917)

Two brothers lived in the forest: a big one and a little one. The big brother was illiterate, and the little one was an avid reader. A few days before Easter they got in a fight. The big brother said: "It's Easter Sunday—time to break your fast."

The little brother looked at the calendar. "It's still Thursday," he said.

The big brother did not like to be contradicted—no matter was small to him, all were equal, and it was better not to cross him. He grew angry—he loomed over his little brother with an ax:

"So, you won't break your fast? It's Thursday, you say?"

"I won't. It is Thursday."

"Thursday, you punk?" And he chopped up his little brother with the ax, stashing the body under his workbench. He fired up the stove to heat the room, broke his fast with what the Lord provided, and sat under the watchful gaze of the saints, satisfied. When from behind the warm stove, a cricket chirped:

"Thursday-Thursday. Thursday-Thursday."

The big brother grew angry, and he climbed under the stove to look for the cricket. He crawled on his belly, inch by inch, and when he crawled out again he was all sooty, terrible, black: but he caught the cricket and chopped it with the ax. He had broken a sweat now so he opened the window, and sat under the

watchful gaze of the saints, satisfied. Now it was over.

And under the window, out of nowhere, chirped sparrows: "Thursday, Thursday, Thursday!"

This angered the big brother even more, and he swung wildly at the sparrows with his ax. He chased them, chased them, chopping at those sparrows, but they flew away.

"Well, thank God. I chopped the damned word at least: Thursday."

And all that chopping at Thursday had made the ax dull! He began to sharpen the ax—and the sound of the ax on the stone was *Thursday, Thursday, Thursday*.

Well, if even the ax wanted to talk about Thursday, that was it! He tossed the ax away—it huddled in the bushes—and lay where he was until Easter Sunday.

On Easter Sunday, the little brother was resurrected, of course. He got out from under the workbench, and said to his older brother: "Come on, get up. What a dumb idea, trying to chop a word. But never mind. It's Easter—let's celebrate!"

FIERY A (1918)

The boys who are very smart, they're given books. Little Vovochka was *very* smart, and they gave him a book: about Martians.

Vovochka went to bed—but how could he sleep? His ears burned, his cheeks burned. For it turned out that a long time ago, Martians had given us signs on Earth, and we— We were engaged in all this nonsense: history according to Dmitry Ilovaysky, etc. But that was no longer possible.

In the hayloft: Vovochka and three second-graders, the most trusty. Ilovaysky lay in the corner. Four heads pored over a piece of paper: drew with a pencil, *sh-sh, sh-sh*, their ears burning, their cheeks burning...

At dinner, the big ones read the newspaper: articles about bread, strikes, etc. And they argued, and argued, about all kinds of nonsense.

“Hey, Vovka! Why are you grinning?”

“Because it's so wonderful: the Martians gave us signs, and you—you argue about all kinds of nonsense.”

“You and your Martians...” — Back to their stuff again. Stupid big ones!

They fell asleep at last. Vovochka, quiet as a mouse, put on boots, trousers, a jacket, and, trembling, slipped out the window, landing in an empty monastery pasture behind the lumberyard of the merchant Zagolyashkin.

Four second-graders, the most trusty, hauled firewood from Zagolyashkin's wood pile. They made a letter A out of the wood—and a fiery A burned in the pasture for Martians, a colossal fiery A: thirty-five feet long.

“The scope! Direct the scope!”

Little Vovochka had brought the spotting scope; it was shaking.

“Almost... almost... Not yet... Now, now!”

But on Mars, all was as it had been before. The Martians went on about their business and did not see Little Vovochka's fiery A. Well, in that case, they would see it the next day... Tomorrow they *had* to see it.

“What are you doing today, birthday boy?”

“What a special day it is!”

Vovochka didn't say anything: it was all the same. The silly big ones didn't understand that a new, *interplanetary* era had begun for Ilovaysky to record. Now, surely, there would be Martians...

It was a great night: The fiery red A, four crimson shadows of the great second-graders, and the spotting scope was pointed and trembling...

But Semyon, who kept watch on Zagolyashkin's lumberyard, was not drunk that night. He knew exactly where to find the thieves. His voice came from behind them:

“Ah-ha, you rascals! Transporting firewood for no reason? Hold, hold, hold! Wait, wait!”

They split. Three of the most trusty made it through the fence. But Little Vovochka was caught by the watchman and flogged.

And in the morning, the stupid big ones put the great second-graders back in history class: one day before the exam.

TALES OF FITA (1917)

The First Tale of Fita

Fita wound up spontaneously in the basement of the police station. Old, closed cases were piled there, and from upstairs Ulyan Petrovich, police officer, heard someone scratching, pitter-pattering around. Ulyan Petrovich opened the door—there was dust, but this did not concern him, and after the dust had cleared it left behind, coated gray, our Mr. Fita.

His gender, predominantly male; and a red wax seal imprinted with a number dangled on a string around his neck. He was drooling, like a baby, but venerably; he was bald and had a big belly; he was an ideal advisor; and his face was not really a face—but neither is Fita really a person.

Ulyan Petrovich liked Fita very much: he adopted him, and right there in a corner of the office he settled him down—and Fita grew up in that corner. His toys were old reports from the basement, which he organized by number and hung in frames in his corner, and to which he lit a candle and prayed solemnly, his wax seal dangling.

One day Ulyan Petrovich arrived at the police station to find Fita drinking from the inkwell.

“Hey, Fitka, what are you doing?” said Ulyan Petrovich.

“I’m drinking ink,” said Fita. “I have to drink something.”

“Well, drink it,” said Ulyan Petrovich. “The ink is official.”

So Fita drank ink.

Now it came to the point that—ridiculous as it is to say—he drank so much ink, that you could put a pen in his mouth and fill it and write with it, the ink was as real as any other ink in the police station. And in that way Fita scribbled various reports, contracts, and bulletins, and hung them in his corner.

“Well, Fita,” said the officer, Fita’s adopted father, “it seems to me that pretty soon you’ll be governor of the province!”

And it turned out exactly as Ulyan Petrovich predicted: overnight Fita became governor. It was a difficult year, this one: cholera and famine—but so what? Fita toured the province by express coach, and wherever he went the residents gathered around him.

Fita said to them: “Cholera, famine—that’s what you have? Well: me too! But how did this happen? What did you do?”

The residents said:

“We did nothing. We are well. We have doctors here, and the cholera is almost cured. Just send us a little more bread...”

“Ha!” scoffed Fita. “I will give you a doctor! I will send you bread!”

He produced a pen and, filling it with ink from his mouth, wrote on the spot: “Order No. 666. On this day, the hunger in this province, having entered into proper administration, has been strictly canceled by

me. It is hereby prescribed that the residents of the province should consider themselves to be full. Fita.”

“Order No. 667. On this day, I order the immediate termination of cholera. In view of the foregoing, it is to be known that those people calling themselves doctors have quit voluntarily, and those who illegally declare themselves to have cholera will be subject to punishment under the full strength of the law. Fita.”

These instructions were read in the churches and pasted on all the fences. The residents held a thanksgiving service and on the same day erected a monument to Fita in the market square. Fita was stately, bald and big-bellied, and wore his seal about his neck: this is how the turkey walks, and strikes its wings in the dust.

A day passed and then another. On the third, look out! Cholera came to the office of Fita himself. The choleric man stood there and writhed, for, after all, people don't understand what is for their own good. Fita imposed on him the maximum punishment. And the choleric man ran out of the office... and in defiance, died.

And the residents continued to die—whether from cholera or starvation—and there weren't enough police to suppress them in their crime. The residents scratched their heads and decided to bring back the doctors and send for more bread. And Fita was thrown out of office and bludgeoned by the uneducated people.

They say that Fita ended just as unreal as he'd begun: he didn't scream, but merely became less and less, like a deflating balloon. And the only thing to show that he had ever been there at all was an ink stain and his numbered wax seal.

Translator's note: The two endings

In the only other English translation of this story that I have been able to find, the actual ending is dispensed with in favor of what appears to be an invention of the translator's own. It goes like this (I paraphrase):

“And that was the end of Fita. But he did so many things in his short term as governor, that there wasn't time to tell them all in just one story.”

I happen to like this ending, and would willingly append it to my own translation, because it flows quite easily into the next Tale of Fita, and because it is in keeping with the bizarre narrative as already set forth. However, the actual ending, omitted above but reproduced below, is perhaps more bizarre, and goes something like this:

“The residents looked: the anti-Christ seal. They wrapped it in cloth so as not to touch it, and buried it near the cemetery fence.”

The Second Tale of Fita

By decree, Fita canceled cholera. The residents of his province led dances and thrived. And Fita went to the people twice a day, talking with the cabmen and at the same time admiring the monument.

“How now, brothers—do you know whose monument this is?” Fita asked them.

“Who, master, does not know?” said one of the cabmen. “It is our governor, who arranges everything. It is Mr. Fita.”

“Well, so it is,” Fita agreed. “And do you need anything? As you say, I am able to arrange it.”

There was a carriage exchange on the square, and it happened to sit very near the cathedral. The cabman looked at the monument, then at the cathedral, then said to Fita:

“Well, we were talking the other day about what a nuisance it is to have to drive around this cathedral. If only there were a straight road across the square...”

Now Fita had a rule: Everything should be as the people wanted it. And Fita was quick as a bullet: he was back at the desk in his office in two seconds flat, with the order drafted and signed.

“I order the existing city cathedral of unknown origin to be demolished immediately,” the order said. “On the site of the aforementioned cathedral, establish a direct road for the city’s cabmen. Furthermore, in order to avoid prejudice, the

execution of the above order should be entrusted to the Saracens. Signed: Fita.”

In the morning, the residents were astonished. “Our cathedral, gracious me! There are Saracens all over it, top to bottom: on all five cupolas, and on the cross at the top, and crawling along the walls like flies.”

Yes, there they were: black and naked, girded only with rope—some with knives, some with awls, some with sticks, some with a battering ram—and everywhere there was dust and smoke. Already the blue cupolas, with their silver stars, were being demolished, and the ancient red brickwork appeared, looking like blood on the white-breasted walls.

The residents could not choke back their tears.

“Father Fita, you are our benefactor, have mercy! We’d rather have to drive round the whole square than lose our cathedral.”

But Fita walked, duck-like—grave, big-bellied—and surveyed the Saracens. They were working; it was good. He stopped in front of the residents, hands in pockets.

“What a bunch of oddballs you are,” he told them. “Everything I do is for the people. Improving the roads for passenger carriages is an urgent need, but your cathedral—what does it do? It’s a trinket.”

Then the residents remembered: Not terribly long ago, when the Tatar warlord Mamai came to the cathedral, they had paid him off—“And perhaps,” they said, “we can pay off Fita in the same way.” So

they sent Fita tribute: three beautiful damsels, and a big bottle of ink.

Fita bristled with anger and stamped his feet.

“Get out of here at once! Mamai indeed. You can mumble and change your mind, but I have made mine up. Amen.”

And he waved at the Saracens with his pen: “Carry on, brothers, with all your strength—the cows are coming home.”

The sun went down, and only rubble remained of the cathedral. Fita chalked a straight line with a ruler. All night the Saracens worked, and by morning the road ran through the market square. And behold! It was perfectly straight.

Pillars were erected at the beginning and at the end of the road, decorated in black ink with stripes like a sentry box, and an inscription was written on them that said:

“The cathedral of unknown origin was destroyed on this date in the year such and such by the acting governor, Fita. He also constructed this road, which shortens the path of the passenger carriages by 350 feet.”

And in this way was the market square finally shaped into a civilized form.

The Third Tale of Fita

The residents behaved excellently, and at five o'clock in the afternoon, Fita announced his will: he abolished the city police. From then on, the police station stood empty, and no police kept watch over the crossroads or from the striped sentry boxes—in their place, everywhere, stood free people.

The residents made the sign of the cross:

“Mother of God, we're still alive. But look at that: standing there in a kaftan! Instead of a watchman, it's a man in a kaftan!”

And the main thing about that was that the free people in the kaftans knew their business, as if they had been born to be police officers. They dragged offenders to the police station, sometimes grunting, sometimes with a punch under the ribs—and everything was just as it should be. The residents joyfully sobbed:

“Glory to the Lord! It's happened—no one made them do it—they beat their own—as free people! Wait, brothers, I'll throw off my coat: it'll be more convenient, then you can beat me on the back in the same way! Knock me down, brothers! Yes, like that. Glory to the Lord!”

Struggling, each in front of the other, the residents vied for a place in prison: it had become so good to be in prison, there are simply no words. And the volunteer guards would search them, and lock them

up, and peer at them through the peephole—all on their own, free people! Glory to the Lord...

However, places soon became scarce, and only those who were better off were allowed into prison. And the others kept watch all night at the entrance, and bought secondhand tickets to the prison from hucksters.

What a method!

And Fita said: "I order the thieves and murderers to be driven out of prison in shame, and returned to complete freedom."

So the thieves and murderers were kicked out into complete freedom, and the residents who wanted to live in prison were gradually accommodated.

The streets had now become empty, except for the free people in kaftans. Somehow that didn't seem right. So Fita issued a new decree:

"It is strictly prescribed to the residents to participate in the freedom of reciting chants and holding processions in national costumes."

It is known that with any novelty comes difficulty. So to facilitate the changes, unidentified people handed each resident a voucher with the text of an exemplary chant. But the residents—foolish people!—were embarrassed and continued to hide.

Fita called for the free people in kaftans to evict the residents from their hiding spots; the free people urged the residents not to be embarrassed, because nowadays they had complete freedom. And anyone who was not persuaded, they took by the scruff of the

neck or clobbered under the cheek until they were finally convinced.

In the evening it was like Easter—and oh, what an Easter!

Specially invited singers sang everywhere. Residents in national costumes marched in step in platoons, and around each platoon were free people with cannons. With one jubilant voice the residents sang, according to the text of the exemplary chant:

*Glory to God for Fita, our king
For he has given us everything!*

Temporary acting governor Fita bowed from the balcony.

In view of the unprecedented success, the residents decided right there—near the balcony where Fita stood, and under the guidance of the free people in kaftans, in unanimous delight—to introduce the freedom of a daily recital of the chant, in platoon formation, which would last from one o'clock until two.

That night, Fita slept soundly for the first time: the residents had been clearly and quickly educated.

The Last Tale of Fita

There was also a wise pharmacist in the city: he created a man, but not the way we sinners do—he created him in a glass jar. So there could not be much that he did not know.

Fita ordered the pharmacist to help him.

“Kindly tell me: Why do my residents, in their free time, walk around bored?”

The wise pharmacist looked out the window at the houses, some of which had very common, plain birds in their yards while some had cockerels, and at the people walking by, some of whom wore pants and some skirts.

“That’s very simple,” he told Fita. “Is this really orderly? In true order, everything must be the same.”

So, that was it. The residents formed a platoon and went out of the city to pasture. And in the empty city, fires were set on all sides and left to burn until the city had been utterly destroyed, leaving only a black bald patch behind—and in the middle of that, the monument to Fita.

Saws cut all night, hammers pounded, and by morning, it was ready: a barracks—like a cholera ward—five miles long, the sides lined with little cubbyholes for the residents, each one numbered. And to each resident was given a copper plate with a number and, recently stitched, a gray cloth uniform.

What a sight they were! Lined up in the corridor, everyone in front of their cubbies, copper plates on

their belts, as radiant as firebirds—all the same, like new coins. It was so good that Fita's nose tickled, but he didn't say anything: just waved his hand and went into his own little cubby, No. 1. "Glory to the Lord," thought Fita. "Everything is done. Now I may die."

In the morning, rising with the light rather than the bell (the bell hadn't yet rung), a party of residents knocked on the door of cubby No. 1:

"Deputies here, your worship, on urgent business."

Fita came out: there were four of them in uniform, venerable residents—bald, elderly. They bowed to Fita.

"For whom are you deputies?" Fita asked them.

The venerable began to stomp, and all four spoke at once:

"This is what it is— It's not possible at all— It's a mess— We represent the bald— You can see it yourself. This pharmacist walks around, curly-haired, while we have no hair. Is it equal? Not at all."

Fita thought about that, and his train of thought went like this: It was not possible to make everyone curly-haired, for the bald could not grow hair; therefore, to be equal, everyone had to be bald.

He waved his hand to the Saracens, and down they flew from all sides and cut everyone's hair off—male, female, it didn't matter, they were all bald as a knee. The wise pharmacist looked very strange without his hair, like a cat caught in the rain.

The Saracens were still in the process of cutting everyone's hair off when Fita was summoned again

by a new party of deputies. He regarded them grimly: what did they want now?

And the deputies:

"Tee-hee," said one of them. "Hee!" said another, nose dripping.

"Who do *you* represent?" asked Fita.

"We—tee-hee—have been sent to your worship—hee, hee—by idiots. Hee! We wish, *sniff*, for everyone, *sniff*, to be... *sniff*, to be... as stupid as we are. Equally..."

A cloud of doubt swirled around Fita, who returned to cubby No. 1 and sent for the pharmacist.

"Have you heard what the idiots want, brother?" Fita asked him.

"I heard." The pharmacist's voice was timid, and his head was wrapped with a chintz scarf against the cold—it was unaccustomed to being shorn.

"Well, what do we do now?" Fita said.

"That is the question, what now. You can't go back."

So before the evening prayer, they read the order to the residents: to all be idiots equally, starting tomorrow.

The residents gasped, but what could they do: they couldn't turn against the authorities. So they sat down hastily to read their intellectual books for the last time—until the evening bell, everyone read. At the ring of the bell they went to bed, and in the morning the residents woke up as perfect idiots.

There was much merriment despite this calamity—elbows pushing each other, a chorus of “tee-hee!” from every cubby. The only topic of conversation was that, presently, the free people in kaftans would be rolling in troughs full of barley porridge.

Fita walked along the corridor, all five miles of it, and all he saw was merriment. Sweet relief! Everyone was equal at last. He embraced the wise pharmacist:

“Well, brother, thanks for the advice. The age will not forget.”

And the pharmacist said to Fita:

“Tee-hee!”

So it turned out that only one was left—Fita had to think for everybody.

Fita locked himself in cubby No. 1 to think, when a party appeared at the door again. This time they didn’t knock, but broke right in, clambering, crawling, rumbling with unhappiness:

“Uh, brother... no— you can’t— Although we are complete idiots, we understand, *sniff*, what you’re doing! You, brother, must become an idiot, too.”

Fita lay down on his bed and cried. For there was nothing he could do.

“All right, God be with you,” said Fita. “Give me until tomorrow.”

All the rest of the day, Fita walked around among these perfect idiots, and little by little he grew stupider, so that by morning he was ready, and he said: “Hee!”

And began to live happily. For no one in the world is happier than a fool.

THE END

GENERAL NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

I once read that Constance Garnett, the translator of many Russian novelists including Dostoyevsky, worked at such a pace that if she encountered something she didn't understand, she skipped it. I, too, have encountered things I did not understand—and, like Constance Garnett, I skipped them. (The two major instances in which this occurs are expanded on below.)

Translation is like putting together a puzzle: not only are you working with the words that are actually there, you are trying to get into the author's head to find out what he might have *meant*. Slowly but surely, the pieces of the puzzle come together, although sometimes that meaning is not obvious until you have already translated one section roughly and moved on to another, or the same word or phrase appears again in a different context. When it comes together suddenly, and you realize what you are seeing, it is surprising and beautiful.

Rule of thumb: If something *really* doesn't make sense, it's probably wrong.

These fairy tales are very spare—or so they appear to my eye—like painting a scene in broad brushstrokes. A word, two: a colon—one dash, another—that's how it is. Not much to go on. Lots to fill in. I've tried to fill things in, and to do so in a way that is not intrusive.

In the following notes, I am not going into an explanation of my choices—why this was omitted, that included, this phrased a certain way, that rephrased another. These are the choices every translator makes and the list would be endless. Rather, I offer a bit of background on specific aspects of the language employed and on historical items of interest, which I came across in the course of the project.

—KSD

2 February 2020
Ashland, Oregon

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

The Ivans

Ivanik The village of the Ivans is called, in Russian, Ivanikha (Иваниха). However I have opted for *Ivanik*, as, to my mind, it retains the stress—and thus the correlation in the reader's mind—of Ivan, with emphasis on the first syllable. The kh sound is a sound we don't have in English anyway (Bach, loch), and could be transliterated as kh, ch, or even just h, depending on the word. The *-ik* of the ending furthermore recalls the suffix *-ic*, “of or pertaining to”, the way *-y* would: a very *Ivany* village.

Names of the Ivans Samoglot (Самоглот)—Self-Eating. In Russian folklore, the samoglot (“self-gulper”) is a cloud wolf that devours celestial bodies. “His mouth is terrible, ready to swallow any opponent; under the tail of the wolf is a bath, and behind him is the sea. If you take a steam bath in that bath, and swim in that sea, you will become a glorious, handsome young man.”—Alexey Afanasyev, *Poetic Views of Nature of the Slavs* (1866)

Ogolten (Оголтедь)—Frenzied.

Nosopyr (Носопыр)—Nosed, like a rhinoceros.

Solenyye Ushi (Соленые Уши)—Salty Ears.

Beleny Obyelsya (Белены Объялся)—Addle-Brained. *Belena*—henbane—is a poisonous plant that was, at one time, used in Russian folk medicine to treat toothache. Beleny obyelsya (“eating too much henbane”) means someone who is crazy or stupefied. The phrase “he’s just eaten too much henbane” (он точно белены объялся) refers to a person who is doing stupid things, raving, etc.

Pereplyuy (Переплюй)—Out-Spitter. The name is derived from the word that is used to describe the spitting contest (переплюнуть, “spit further than”), so a connection

is obviously implied. The same word is also variously translated as “surpass” or “do better than”, however, so I opted to call him One-Upman. If you prefer to read it as Out-Spitter, by all means, do so.

The Devourer

Original title in Russian: Khryapalo (Хряпало). Khryapat (хряпать) could mean “beat/knock/strike” or “biting or gnawing something with a crunch”.

Kochetyg A kind of an awl. But I didn’t translate Chryapalo, so why start now?

shoes In Russian, *lapti* (лапти)—bast shoes. Bast is a fiber taken from the bark of trees, woven into a form-fitting shoe. Bast shoes were common footwear in the countryside all the way into the 20th century, at least among the poor.

Arabs

Arabs Araps: blacks, Moors.

Buyan Mythical island that appears frequently in Russian fairytales and folklore.

The Astronomer

Original title in Russian: Chaldea (Халдеѳ). The Chaldeans were Semitic tribes living in Mesopotamia. Chaldeans in ancient Greece were derogatively considered to be wandering fortunetellers and astrologers—which is presumably the origin of the character’s name.

Kupala Folk festival celebrating the summer solstice. Festivities include building bonfires and making flower

wreaths, which may be floated (often bedecked with candles) down the river.

Maunder Thursday Chisty Chetverg (Чистый Четверг, “Clean Thursday”), falling on the Thursday before Easter, commemorates the washing of the feet and the last supper of Jesus Christ, according to the Bible.

still-burning candles Called “Thursday candles”, they are lighted during service and brought back from church still burning. If the flame goes out, it is believed the bearer will suffer misfortune, but if it does not, the bearer will survive until the next year. To prevent the candle being extinguished by the wind, the bearers sometimes protect the flames with paper lanterns.

The Church of God

troika A team of three horses harnessed abreast; also the vehicle pulled by such a team.

how he could whistle! There is a reference here, in the original Russian, to *Zmey Gorynych* (Змей Горыныч)—the Serpent Gorynych. The Serpent Gorynych is a fire-breathing dragon with several heads who lives in the mountains near Smorodina, the river of fire, and guards the Kalinov Bridge, which connects the world of the living with the world of the dead. As this is also, more or less, the scene taking place in the story, I assume that is what the reference is about, but since I am not sure, I have omitted it from the translation.

tarantass A four-wheeled, horse-drawn vehicle, popular in Russia in the early 1800s.

icon painters The Russian word used is *bogomaz* (богомаз), which is defined as an icon painter, but one who is “often bad, artless”.

the bells rang soft... In Russian, *malinovy* (малиновый)—raspberry. “Raspberry ringing” apparently has nothing to do with the fruit: one theory is that it comes from the name of the town Malines (now better known by its Dutch name, Mechelen) in Belgium, which at one time was a prominent bell-casting town. Bells from Malines were known for their pleasant, soft timbre—melodically iridescent ringing.

rug In Russian, *orlets* (орлец)—“eagle rug”, a small round rug depicting an eagle, on which the bishop stands in certain Eastern Orthodox services.

Буака and Кака

byaka, kaka Both childish words for “something bad”.

Three Handed Mary The Bogorodica Troijeručica (Russian: Троеручица, “three-handed”) is a wonderworking icon of Mary, mother of Jesus. The story goes that after having his hand cut off, John of Damascus prayed to the icon and, miraculously, his hand was restored. In thanks, he had a replica of his hand cast in silver, and this he attached to the icon, which is how it came to have “three” hands.

new red shirt An omission here. What it actually says (to my eye) is: “on patronal holidays, in new red shirts, the peasant was congratulated”. But who was wearing new red shirts? What is the significance? By whom was he congratulated? Why? I don’t have the answer to these questions, so I have revised the sentence to the way it appears in the book.

Maslenitsa Folk festival celebrating the vernal equinox. Festivities include sleigh rides, making and eating pancakes

and crepes (representing the sun), and burning a straw man.

Tales of Fita

Fita In Russian, *fita* (фита) is a letter of the old Russian alphabet: “ѳ”, pronounced like our “f”, though representing the “th” sound of words borrowed from Greek (equivalent, then, to the Greek *theta* “θ”).

police officer More specifically, *okolotochny* (околоточный)—city guard, in charge of the local neighborhood. These police were required to know the inhabitants of their neighborhood as well as what their occupations were, and keep tabs on what they got up to. The position was abolished in 1917.

tribute Specifically, *yasak* (Russian: ясак), which was tribute exacted from the indigenous people, originally by Mongols, and later by Imperial Russia.

striped sentry box In Russian, *budka* (будка). These sentry boxes were placed at the crossroads of city streets and manned by a *budochnik* (будочник), the lowest-ranking member of the city guard, whose job it was to maintain order in the surrounding streets. Their duties included suppressing crime and catching violations of city cleanliness and fire safety. Sentry boxes are described both in reference to the pillars at the ends of the road in the second tale, and directly in the third. An example of a sentry box can be found on the right hand side of the cover art of this book. I think it's a fantastic picture.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the assembly of this book, the translator wishes to thank:

The invaluable resource of... the Internet.

– Google Translate, Russian Wiktionary, context.reverso.net, and so on, are your friends.

– morfologija.ru and dic.academic.ru were frequently consulted for the more dated and obscure words.

– Wikipedia has some great pages you can find only in Russian, and provided the art on the cover. Russian Wikipedia is a rabbit hole and it's easy to get lost down there.

Also, acknowledgment must be given to the other English translators of selected stories. Part way through my own translation of “Tales of Fita” (although it's at the end of the book, it was the first part of the collection I translated), I came across John Dewey's version in *The Sign: And Other Stories* (2015). Having this on hand as a reference validated what I had put down so far, and let me know I was not completely off the mark—the story really was that far out. This confidence boost gave me the encouragement needed to venture further into the unknown territory of the other stories.

Seth Graham's version of “The Ivans”, in *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and*

Soviet Fairy Tales (2005), pointed me in the right direction and helped me see what I was missing in many instances. (Again, although it comes first in the book, I translated it last—having consistently put it off, as it appeared to me to be the most difficult... which it was).

Of course, this is, as far as I know, the first translation into English of some of the stories—Arabs, The Astronomer (Chaldea), Byaka and Kaka, Thursday, and Fiery A. I had no reference for them, and if they are completely off the mark, the fault lies entirely with me.

Visit the translator at his website
www.kaiswansondale.com