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God in Retrospect

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God in Retrospect

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God in Retrospect

CHRIS CHICK

It was less than an hour since we left Melk until we stood at the gate of Mauthausen concentration camp and stared blankly into the bunks, empty of sleeping bodies and mangled corpses for decades yet, still managing to incur a feeling of sadness and humility for anyone who saw them. The Mauthausen Camp guide was a young man with dark hair--I don't remember his name. I do, however, remember how great of an effort he went to to try and humanize the guards. He told us that too many people come there, to his home country, with a preformed idea about what had happened there and how it affected both the world at large, as well as the rolling grassy hills that sat below this twisted city of barbed wire and concrete.

I stared down a long stone stairway on the edge of a cliff adjacent to the camp, and the quarry that sat at its base. I couldn't help but imagine the ghosts of those opposed to and deemed unfit by the regime to which our camp guide's grandfather, our tour guide's great uncle, and one of the Abbey resident's grandfathers belonged. These ghosts still marched up those stairs and across the ridge. Every now and again, one would stumble and fall, and he'd be beaten. More than a few times, the stone would topple off his back and into the chasm around which the stairs wound, and he would chase it, following it in some feeble attempt to grab it. Though I can't be sure, there was a subtle emptiness in the quarry and in the bunks, the vastness of which I'm sure was infinitely apparent to those who resided here; God must have a blindspot the size of Eastern Europe or, as is more likely, there is no God here.

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When my church went down to West Virginia to help rebuild the homes of people too poor to repair their own, we were all so afflicted with savior complex that we weren't even able to see the signs on other people; the boils such a disease forms were still too small to find when we'd look down our noses at each other, at the other church, or at the people whose houses we were coming to repair. We found ways to scoff at people who'd never been given a break for not having the money or wherewithal to repair their own roof, when they'd have an Xbox by the TV or a sports car parked out on the lawn. Still, though, from up on that high horse I was able to still find another pedestal to climb onto. I was there for the right reasons, I believed, because I was there to repair homes and not to repair a wounded spirit or failing faith.

Mine were strong. I was, savior complex or not, there to make homes warmer, safer, and drier, as the mission statement of the project claimed. I wasn't there for me, I was there for them, and I was, as far as I knew, entirely alone in that assessment.

That's why I liked to work on the roof. It was July in the southernmost county in West Virginia and that roof was the only spot that the sun peeked through the trees. You couldn't sit down up there because the tin roof we laid was even hotter than the sun itself would lend. You had to wear a harness too, as the roof, though only about ten feet off the ground on one side, sloped down to a drop-off that was, as we were told, closer to eighty or so. It might seem obvious that I, as well as anyone else who thought that the harness would slow down their ever important work, refused to wear them. There was something about the danger and the agony of being up there, without gloves, glasses, or a hat, that made it feel that much more real. The other teams must've spit stardust into spackle if they wanted to claim they did half the important work that we did. They didn't slice their hands open or burn them on tin, nor did they teeter just inches off of a literal cliff to put the last few nails of the frame in.

It was that Thursday when the storm rolled into Mullens, West Virginia. They came through most nights, drifting in quietly late at night and leaving the ground wet and clouds to roll down the mountains and slide into the valleys. Now, though, we saw the wall of grey crest over the mountaintop and drop into the valley adjacent to us, and saw the clouds cover the sun and cool the roof down to where we could work without burning our hands when we leaned down to drive a nail. The clap of thunder knocked one girl down to her knees and almost shook the ladder off the gutter on which it leaned. They all ran to huddle in the safety of the van whereas I, along with Ed, the contractor who led our group and Abe, another sophomore, grabbed the tarps and started trying to cover the roof up for the coming storm, as we had every night prior. We laid down the tarp and nailed a two-by-four over it to hold the water back, and then we laid another, and another. The water came down, but we worked. The thunder and lightning persisted, and the wind blew our untied tarps off the roof, but still, we worked. After about forty five minutes, Ed finally climbed down the ladder and found the last spot in the van covered, only after putting out the aluminum and plastic tailgating tent we ate lunch under to serve as some kind of cover for us. "Keep the tent low," he said, "and don't worry, these storms pass pretty fast. Just hang out here 'til it's over."

Worrying was never part of our plan, nor was sitting under the tent once the mud started coming in under the legs, forming little rivers around our boots. If it had rained like this for longer than the hour or two that it usually did, these mountains would have been reduced to shear rock, as the

mud and the houses stuck into it would be carried down the mountainside. To avoid the mini mudslide, we ducked out from under the tent and ventured out into the rain. As we did, Roy, the father of the family whose house we were repairing, rolled up on his ATV, not the least bit concerned in the face of the storm. “Y’all wan have some fun?” He asked, speaking out of the side of a smile that had more open space than teeth.

“Sure,” we called back, “what’ve ya got in mind?”

“Run on in th-house, grab Ronnie, tell ‘im tuh grab that lahter thar in the back closet.” When we returned with the seventeen year old Ronnie, and acetylene torch, and a speaker (which Ronnie insisted we’d need), we stood in the rain for a minute before we heard a deep mountain drawl over the wind. “Whatch’all standin’ thar for,” Roy called as he rounded the corner with a cardboard box of fireworks covered by a thin sheet of plastic, “getcher asses on up ‘err.” He used the box to gesture up to the roof. We checked that the van was in a blind spot and grabbed the ladder, put it up against the gutter where it had been, and stepped onto the roof, keeping low and steady. Roy and Ronnie, however, strode onto the roof in the face of wind and rain as though this was just their pastime.

Ronnie put the speaker down and draped a portion of loose tarp over it, trying (somewhat in vain) to keep it dry. He played something loud, something classic, and it felt as though it echoed over the valley, though I’m sure the sound didn’t travel much further than the edge of the roof. We lit fireworks, one after another, and shot them off into the valley, bursting in colors out and up against the canvas of a grey sky. They always rained down on a trailer below, or right back to us, but they never seemed to touch us.

Roy leaned against the roof where the slant changed angles and tipped his hat over his face, and then laced his fingers together behind his head, laid back as though the storm wasn’t raging around him. Ronnie tried to see how many fireworks he could hold and set off without blowing his hand off, launching spurts of sparkles out over our heads and into the valley below, while Abe danced and slid in the puddles on the roof making jet ski streams behind his heels when he did. We laughed when he slipped and fell hard enough to put a teenager sized dent in the tin we’d just laid. I stood close to the edge of the roof, never quite dangling my toes over the cliff but going close enough that a swift gust of wind would’ve carried me off.

I’d like to say I was thinking of God then. I wish I were, because maybe if I were able to identify the warmth I felt within myself as God, that sheer loosening of noose knots and the untwisting of the constant screwdriver in my stomach as something otherworldly, I might’ve actually been able to call it a conversion event. Of course, though, the knowledge of these kinds of moments is often only in hindsight. The conversion story seems to so often attempt to mirror that of the Apostle Paul that it never seems to offer leeway

or condolence for those who were raised in the church but only found God in retrospect, through the likes of a man who self-identified as Mountain Trash and had the humility to admit he didn't have the money to fix his roof on his own. To say I found God on the roof, to say I saw His light when the fireworks spit sparks over relative darkness, would be disingenuous. All I can say is that he was there.

Still, we stood and watched as the rain slowed and the clouds started to part, slithering out of the valley as quickly as they came. The sun had only just started to peak out of the clouds and the roof began to steam. Roy lifted up his hat when he felt the sun on the undersides of his arms and simply sat up, put a big pinch of snuff in his front lip, patted us on the back, and slid down the ladder without hardly a word. Ronnie might as well have done the same, leaving Abe and I up there alone, waiting for our crew to come out of the van and for all of us to get back to work.

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To call even the parapets and gothic domes of the Abbey opulent would have been an understatement. We stepped off the bus outside Melk Abbey, cold and huddling together in our little cliques, the way every other high school group in the country would. We were already shivering in the Austrian air, a far cry from the spring-reminiscent air we'd had back in Venice, or in Padova. I was still in a T-Shirt, and had to run back onto the bus to grab the sweatshirt I'd decided I didn't need until now. Some of the other people on the trip had the foresight to pack warm clothes and coats; they were smart enough to prepare themselves for this weather when they got on the bus back in Padova. I am not, nor have I ever been, a forward thinker. This is, too, not to mention the fact that the drive was six hours of beautiful Italian hills and then two hours of snow-capped alps and an hour of winding Austrian roads. When we crossed the Alps into Austria, we were blanketed under snowbank clouds and snow-swept roads; we didn't see the white until we emerged from the last tunnel and all had our collective 'Dorothy and Toto' moments in our new Oz.

You would've heard that exact gasp again when we stepping into the sanctuary of the cathedral at the Abbey. They brought us in through a sort of employee entrance to the Abbey and showed us where we could put our things, change into our concert attire, and start warming up our voices, though eight hours of bus conversation with one another did more warming up than anything our director could've done. They gave us about five minutes before a man in a suit strode through the door and asked us all to follow him. We filed through a long narrow corridor and then stepped into the sanctuary. I'm sure there were lights on because it was bright but I was convinced that the only light within the cathedral was stemming from the gold upon gold that decorated the entire expansive room.

“It’s gold leaf,” they said, likely as a preemptive response to questions of church opulence or hypocrisy regarding the church’s attitude to poverty. I’d be lying, of course, if I said that question never once crossed my mind in the midst of all of it. It was, however, the least of my concerns while standing and staring up into the gold ceilings, the jeweled gold and silver cross that hung at the center above the altar, and hearing our dress shoes clunk and echo on the polished stone floor.

I stared into the pews and on fading kneelers, imagining the ghosts of weary souls and Sisters of this particular order alike coming together to kneel and pray to God represented by this cathedral, by this gold, by that opulent cross in the center of the shining organ pipes behind it. I was forced to wonder whether or not the Sisters of Melk Abbey knew what was going on an hour away. I have to wonder whether or not they brushed off rumors because most orders simply don’t concern themselves with politics, and to think about such things would distract them from their purpose there, as if wondering about lost souls would distract someone from prayer and the perpetual polishing of gold. I have to wonder if, when the Nazis came to power, they tried to take anything away from the Abbey to fund their efforts. I would assume the sisters and the Vatican would have both fought fervently against it had it happened. I wondered if they spent more time praying than polishing.

Still, when they put us on mahogany risers and we finally had our chance to sing, I turned off the visual awe and spiritual distress and sang. I kept my head buried in my music with a fervent desire to not be distracted by the light reflecting off golden walls and polished floors, until we hit the last note, the last chord, of “Wade in the Water,” after which we stopped and stood in complete silence, as did the audience, and listened to the almost five second echo lingering in the gold-reflected air, hanging in perfect pitch. Our choir director, Mr. Woodworth, had an enormous goofy smile on his face. Most of us closed our eyes, smiling, feeling it wrap around us and buzz as it clung to life until it faded out into a whisper. Someone in the audience, someone’s mother who came along for the trip, cried, I’m sure. I almost did.