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THE JOSHUA TREE

Translated from Croatian by Jacob Agee

“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” (Ecclesiastes, 9:10).

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.” (Matthew, 7:13).

Rambling drunk, after one of many college nights out, at some point when I'd already become conscious of the weight of my own choice, my insecure future and of the probably-difficult years awaiting me – after an already difficult period – I found, on the stairway of one of the student dorm pavilions, a medallion of Our Lady. Pulled off from its necklace chain. Old fashioned, drab, flat, and already a little eaten by time; as if someone had already worn it out and so had now passed it on to another. In this, I saw a sign. Generally, during that time of insecurity, of fear of the life that was coming, which at that time bore only defeat – I searched for signs everywhere. Twenty years on, I have that medallion even still today. Twenty years was necessary for me to realise security and peaceful sleep, just what I had wanted back then. What was this a sign of? A twenty-year trail of thorns? Of nothingness, emptiness, darkness? My mother, an unfaithful believer, firmly believes in the cross. She says that in life, everyone is given some kind of cross to bear. The cross is the only real, irrevocable fact of our lives. For some, it is poverty, for some it's loneliness, for some it's illness, for others it's fellow man... Don't throw off your own cross. Don't wish for someone else's. Don't compare your own cross and someone else's. Don't seek out the reasons for your own cross. Don't muse about a life without your own cross, because this is then no longer your life. These were her five commandments. The five of them are opening up for me, as I write this. And closing one circle, crowned with the rusted medallion.

The question of all questions, it imbues life and literature – and it's especially touching that Hans Küng begins one of his discussions in the book *Does God Exist?* with just such an example from literature. He mentions a scene from a work by Bertolt Brecht, "Stories of Mr Keuner", in which one character asks Mr K. if he has a God, to which he answers: "I counsel you to consider whether your behaviour would change immediately according to my answer to this question. If it would not change, then we can move on from the question. But if it would change, then I can only be of help to you in as much as telling you what you have already decided on: that God is necessary for you."

Hasib is standing in front of us, showing us Jerusalem as if it were his own city – so he stretches out his open arms in front of us, as if all the city's secrets were in his palms. But in order to close his palms, and for his face to come out of its lethargy and begin to speak, it was necessary to put money bills into them. Everything was arranged, but not paid for. But the moment the banknotes land, then we have an agreement, and once again we are people to one another. In the Holy Land, money moves everything: faith in people is just a few pebbles. But that faith convinced us we were not being deceived. And that faith quickly showed itself to be vain. Hasib pressed his hand around the bills, grinned widely and lead us off to get acquainted with the city, for a fair price. We were small before the Damascus Gate at the entrance to the city, just as we were small in fear in front of our guide. But already by the gate, Hasib left us with a bony young man – the sight of him flooded us with pity. Hasib pulled out a pocket handkerchief, wiped the sweat from his bald scalp, glistening like the Dome of the Rock, singled out just a few notes from the sum of money which he had pressed within his fist, pushed them towards Bony and left with the rest of the fair price. He had to disappear quickly, his shirt was transparent from the sweat.

The bony guide asked us about faith. Without prejudice, without any considerations and without setting the stage for anything – to which god do you bow? He looked at me, the first in the group, to his left. And these few seconds lasted eternally. In them, I wandered the trackless backcountry of my own doubts, hopes, upbringing, traditions, and flux. Good question. To which god? How does this god look, how would I describe him? What is he to me, and what am I to him? This is not a question, my friend, for a speedy chat in front of the Damascus Gate. But just as I was explaining this to him, someone else from the group was faster. “Catholics.” “Aha”, Bony nodded, and wrinkled his forehead. It was evident that he was recalculating the route. Catholics. Jews. Muslims. Every route was different. He has a story for everyone. Or, perhaps he has the same story for everyone, which he dresses up just differently enough to deceive us jointly into thinking that each us got our own story. And the more we lope with him in towards the interior of the old city, the more sure I am that Bony sells the same product in three different ways, three times. That’s how his price is so low. And how, especially because of this, Hasib can take his cut and everyone is happy. Bony has a sure step and a quivering voice as he announces universal places of history and culture. But without Hasib, it’s nothing. The remainder of the price which Hasib took away, covers the warranty. The wrinkled back of Hasib’s head, above his short, but bulging shoulders, warrants that everything we hear, can without doubt or delay be built into our own faith.

Where is that initial point from which we and I set off on this path, and from which one leaves once they have made up their mind about travelling towards something greater? Søren Kierkegaard writes in *Brevier* about three stages. Aesthetic, ethical, and religious. In the aesthetic stage, there is nothing exalted; it is only an immediate human reflex towards harmony, or towards what is already, in that moment, "beautiful". All the years of reading literature, I see, are just that. In this stage, there is no choice, only reflex towards refined construction. Kierkegard links ethical existentialism with choice; here one chooses, between good and evil, but both of which are manifested in the everyday or – *or*. Again, in immediacy. I was encircled by ascents and falls; I loved, but hated still more. Tired from the everyday choosing between these two. Religious existentialism, the ultimate stage, means the breaking of ties with the immediate. One self-proclaims to the dead. This suffering is the pith of everything, though not as a passing moment, but a continuous accompaniment, says Kierkegaard. Self-annihilation is essential for a connection with something absolute. One has not become base in this way; for he was also base before, except that now he is cognizant of it. Kierkegaard does not write about this, but I can see, from his words, that it is possible for something Great to emanate from this Nothing. One can be big, but can feel satisfaction when it boils down to the very least.

I had come to Jerusalem with one other bit of business. Concerning a marathon. There were many of them before, and each one had a particular meaning of its own. Each one was a reckoning with something or someone. A trial before the true one. Even if that true one never came, a certain cognizance or thought remained. Something that sticks to that piece of metal they hand us at the finish line. Engraved, maybe it's only read sometime later. It is inerasable. And understandable to no one else. This time, some of these letters had already been engraved for me before. When I realised that V. would never be better. That what was needed here was one of those miracles we read about but which no longer happen. But for which we still hope. If only, at least this once, the truth about giving birth and death could be clarified for me. Can one die and be born during life? Is it possible to control the moment of your own rebirth? And then, I become ashamed of these superfluous thoughts as soon as I remember V. In front of her, there stands real death, behind which we see nothing. But just because I cannot see her still smiling beyond that death, does not mean that image is not there. Rather, it means only that that image is not accessible to me. An image which would conquer nothingness. For that image, I'll step to the course. I took the jersey and wrote on it, across the chest, in felt pen: "Don't give up, V.!"

In front of the Holy Sepulchre. In front of the Dome of the Rock. In front of the Wailing Wall. Crowds. A multitude of people. It seems as if it's stirring; but within the mass, tiny movements are perceptible. But the mass remains. Movement and stasis at once. What is static, what does not stir, is – human quest. Only it is continuous. What are all these people looking for? They have in their eyes the alloys of hope, of despair, impatience, anxiety, convulsion ... Their gazes cling to the folds of the walls, the worn inscriptions, the cubes within the cobblestones. Perhaps they are reading some secret letter not accessible to me. Sooner or later, one has had enough of the answers others offer, and so decides to search for them himself. They search for these answers in the stone; I search for them in them. I watch the people. Briefly, compassion comes over me, but then I wonder – should I deplore more those who desperately seek answers, or those who have given up on the search? I plunge into the labyrinth of the city. Into the mass of people. If something exists here, it will be reflected in me or in the people around me. It will materialise as experience, feeling, knowledge. It is what I'm able to seize. Write down. I'm a spy amongst them. A parasite with hidden motives. Such meetings and experiences are intimate acts. What is impolite to ask some solitary person in front of the Holy Sepulchre – I write about that. Is this right? It's one more question for which I need an answer.

L. is sleeping with a small white book, with angels on the covers. The sharp edges of the covers have left streaks on his face. He rises in the morning, and looks at me with drowsy eyes, with a threatening sign incised under them. Threatening like the days ahead of us, the future I'm not able to secure for him. "Daddy, wait for me so I can pray." He rubs his eyes and opens the page on which the Morning Prayer is written. I don't know its words, nor where this book came to him from. Where all this came to him from. There is something, above all of us, some mysterious equilibrium, because of which he doesn't ask me why I don't know. And doesn't seek for me to participate. It's something which will be straightened out in the end.

The Dome of the Rock is the oldest and most beautiful mosque. The third most holy site of Islam. Its dazzling yellow roof, covered over with golden sheets, glitters in the harsh sunlight, all the way to the edges of the city. The rest of the churches are buried away somewhere, steeped in the labyrinth of the city. Under the Dome is a row of decorated tiles with scenes of the "Night Journey". The journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, this place from which he was elevated into heaven. Where he comprehended all the answers to his own questions. All of us are travellers on a night journey. It's life, I guess. And death. The journey never ends. For the dead travel too. They come together under the Dome of the Rock, in the Well of Souls. They meet twice a month to pray. Someone else's god, but then again – the god of all of us who travel. The mosque is cloaked with blue tiles, dappled with verses and inscriptions, rambling lines; it is the sky. The golden dome is what is above the sky; the place in which the journey will finish; Muhammed's and ours. In this same place too, Abraham wanted to sacrifice his own son; and here is also the location of the Temple of Herod's era. Again, their god rose to represent all three. Radiance, gilding, motley, colour. The churches of my own memory are dark, grey, made of stone on which there are traces of moisture, of the blackness of cities and of weather and time. What if I get used to that god of others? Would he adopt me? Would the other gods hold this against me? Their god is all in the tendrils. All in motleys and mosaics which glitter. If you look closely, the lines begin to dance, to twist. Their god dances and delights in it. Ours is subdued, does not breath, is covered over with patina. Suppose the gods could blend, like pastel colours… On a difficult and long journey, it's always better to have three counsellors than one.

Professor M.S., at the moment we are looking at him, exalted, although he is walking amongst us, beyond reach, although we are smiling derisively at him, asks if we know what the highest pinnacle of world literature is, and we answer that we don't know, even though we do know what will follow because he has given the same speech a few times already. Just for us to see him defeated. "The Book of Job", said this man who had read everything. And right after giving the answer, he turned into a little humiliated Job. "I do everything for you, God", he would pray, "whatever you want, always I complied with you, meekly believed you, yet again you are tormenting me in the end. Why? Why, God", Professor M.S. would ask, stooping his shoulders, bending his back and warping his face to the point of tears. Defeated. Broken. I would wait for this moment, but then would suddenly be filled with horror at his appearance, in which I saw my future self. I would fear the future that I knew was following. Though there did remain, somewhere in the background, the hope that his condition might have a better outcome. The literature lectured to us was full of such examples. In a short pigeonhole of time, when I would leave behind the part of Job and turn to preparing for what was to follow, everything remaining of hope would stop. And would then, very quickly after that, dissipate. M.S. would turn his stern face around, scowling, because he was now God. Ready to answer Job. "Why, you ask? Who created the world, you or I? Huh? You or I?", he would repeat, and leaving us in silence, he would sigh and sag his shoulders.

Opposite the city throng, is a hillock of the same type as the one in the old city, only bared, empty, with olives and the odd church, called the Mount of Olives – somewhere near the foot are three rocks. On one of them, Jesus fell onto the earth. He had retired here after the Last Supper, and had prayed in agony before being arrested. The three remaining natural rocks are protrusions, and one of them, Jesus touched. Which rock? Who will testify to the authenticity? It's simple – that rock which has the most polished surface. And it will testify to the millions of hands which have crossed over it. One must approach the low iron wall (coiling low in sharp ends which imitate a crown of thorns), the fenced off rock island in the middle of the church, to hang over it, and place a hand down and merge across the crystal smooth surface with all those other palms, backwards through time, all the way back to that first hand that chose this stone. Our faith is built on his. The stone blanket, spread between cold and faceless tiles, is similar to a scaled bas-relief model of a certain mysterious country. People just lean their palm and leave. I stayed a while longer, to search out all the protrusions and valleys of that relief. In a search for a secret place, with the coordinates of a hiding place in which one might take cover from the beast called nothingness. The one which crumbles our hope, desires and love into stone powder. Should one in the end, then, look at, or touch, the rock on which Jesus fell? To those who choose to look, a bewildering discovery follows. They will see something equally awful and wonderous; known, but also mysterious; simultaneously strange and nigh; disappointing, but also reassuring. They will see themselves.

Above the rock is the Church of Christ's Agony. That's what they called it, on the basis of the rock. Its pillars and floor have a dark stone surface. Cold and alien. But the vault, fragmented into a multitude of smaller arches and domes, is coloured with a heavenly blue. Dappled with golden stars. One of these domes above the altar, however, is completely golden. Every person is in agony; it's the beginning of deliverance. The moment when one accepts and becomes aware of his own agony, he's already half way to salvation. So they say. And so that's why it's around us, while we're in front of the bedrock, the dark stone surface representing the dead of night. Above us is the starry sky. And somewhere in the distance, a golden dome – the moon. It is a reconstruction of the night of Jesus' agony, under the serene heavens. Everything, then, is here, like at the beginning. The night, the suffering, the question, and the cry for help. To believe, then, is to be sure that the journey, once begun, will finish. That begins with pain and with a question. Within this, there's no longer any difference amongst people. Cultures. Faiths. And so this church is also called the Basilica of All Nations. It was built with the will and support of at least twenty nations. There's nothing more shared and unifying, than what's created by human hands. Or there is, but it's not from human hands. It's the forest under heaven. Somewhere I read that churches are actually in imitation of forests; the pillars, with their branching out towards the top, their twisting and arches – they are simply trees and branches. The forest is a primeval human place, of disappearance into oneself. Simultaneously an open and closed space. Churches of all nations should be sown across the world. Everywhere where there is emptiness, where people suffer, where there is pain. With rock at the centre, above which we might burst into tears. It's all ok. We are not the only ones, nor are we alone.

At the church above the village of B., to where we, as children, would climb up the forest's walking trail, breaking branches, beating a path through the snow, rolling stones – Fra B. would await us. Altar boys. We shared both the white habits, and one of those true childhood nightmares. Namely that, on a Sunday morning, at mass, we might get confused before the stares of the severe villagers, and mix up the sacred vessels. Or pass the small white cloth at the wrong moment. Or wedge the key in the closet with the host inside. In front of everyone. Besides that nightmare, and clearer than all other images, both of the church and of its walls and milieux, clearer than the names of the villagers, of distant relatives, I also carry one more additional nightmare. Inscribed only in my memory. In one of his talks, Fra B. said that we should not resist. That if anyone ever feels a calling, that they should not fight back. He did not know what kind of sign it might be – but we would know. It would be clear enough for us to be able to recognize it. But not so strong for us to not be able to suppress it. We would need to inform both him and our parents about everything – every sign, every premonition, every illusion. Children and parents who fail to, he said, I remember it well, would be dogged by misfortune for their whole lives. But woe accompanied all of us, all the same. And it didn't come from above – it came from people around us. What kind of calling was Fra B. speaking of? When I look back, attempting to move my gaze back across nothingness, as if through a throng of depleted remnants blocking my gaze, all the way back to Fra B. standing at the pulpit, it seems to me that he was speaking of a calling for us to be human. When one grows up, fear gives way to guilt. We all might have been better people, had we wanted.

Of all the things in this wasteland, encumbered with miracles, messages and prophecies, as much as with their non-fulfilments, disillusions and stumbling, of all the ruins with their own stones as mute witnesses, one is the most trustworthy, taciturn and plain. The olive tree. Wide knotted trunks. And lonesome shoots of tiny branches. The Garden of Gethsemane. It is below a long hollow dappled by highways and roads climbing up the hill opposite. A heavy hill, falling in under human weight. The city. In the garden, here, amongst the olives, one is a lonesome person, detached, far away. But opposed to the terrible hugeness across, which is hanging over, threatening. Nothing is as well preserved as this garden and the feeling which it exudes; a feeling traversing centuries, binding, amalgamating, thawing away years and differences. Rare are those who could detach themselves from the city, then look at it from this distance, reconciled with their own detachedness. The thousand-year-old olive trees, with their heavy branches, bear solitude on their shoulders; their smell carries solace through this solitude, emptiness. Everything that man has erected, is in vain. For the olive has remained the best witness, refuge, and adornment. The Garden of Gethsemane must be visited at night, when the dark wipes away the traces of time. The dark is timeless. Night is night, the same sort as before condemnation and tragedy. The lights in the distance are the same. A person – solitary, forsaken, bared to the core, at the beginning of his own journey into the unknown – is the same. Days, months and years are merely the leafy décor on the olive trees.

Eight olive trees, it is believed, are direct witnesses of Jesus' final prayers and agony, the night before the Crucifixion. They are fenced off by slim railings, unprotected, bare, lonesome. Their trunks are wide, split, partitioned into knotty branches grown weary over the centuries. Like dilapidated pillars. But from them, young thin branches of olive are still gushing out. Frail, at odds with the trunks from which they are gushing out. Their slim branches are twisting in the weak wind which descends down the Mount of Olives. The sparse and tiny leaves let the sun through – they are too weak to form shade. Like an olive-green, airy lacework. These are trees on their deathbed, but persisting; weighed down by the weight of centuries, but still bearing fruit. And I no longer see these as trees. Instead of trunks I see people. And amongst their fissures, I see disillusions and falls. In the young branches gushing out, I see hope and a notion. About another world. About another *I*.

Faust is a character ready to sell the most valuable thing he had – his own soul – in order to know and perceive. The high point of knowledge; the ultimate pleasure. And to whom? To the devil. He was ready to pay the highest price. With more or less variation, from writer to writer, he is a symbol of what crouches within every one of us. That part of us which is ready to give everything for the ultimate form of one's own life, for its complete fulfilment. Goethe's Faust starts from this, but is also something more complicated. Something closer to me. Goethe's Faust is a copy of Job. God sends Mephistopheles, the devil, to test out this good, erudite man. What he wants to find out is, how far can one can go? And what is everything he is ready for on this journey of his? Goethe's Faust wants to be in perpetual motion. He wants to seek to attain something beyond, nearby, to break through into those regions inaccessible to him. He is a person not reconciled with his assigned condition. Whoever it might be that assigned it to him. Is it a question I now pose myself, of which this book is a reflection? Or on the other hand, is the movement in which I am putting myself now, and in which I will remain, one step towards an agreement with the devil? Does it mean that one is, when in motion, most susceptible to danger from what is wrong and corrupted? And what of a person who does not search? Are they a solution? I found out nothing of this in Faust. Except illusions of a person being able to control evil. At the beginning of the tragedy, the devil turns from a dog into his own true form, and steers the conversation with Faust towards the future agreement on the sale of his soul. And finally, he performs his little play. Upon his farewell, he asks Faust for help, to push the pentagram away from the door as he's not able to leave his house. Mephistopheles, in this way, induces within Faust the mistaken belief that Faust is able to control him. Hence he encouraged him to start out on the search. And so drew him out into the open. And so, that's me. That's us. Out in the open.