

God's House Guest

I met the old crackpot calling himself Jorg von Hallsbauch on an ill-fated trip to Munich as a young academic, intent on touring the gothic cathedrals of central Europe and with a mandate to record their histories. I still remember how hard I had to fight back the laughter and vomit as he introduced himself by that name, with such foul breath.

Some among you will invariably understand the humor. For the rest of you, here's what you're missing: the church I had come to study, The Church of Our Lady, was built by a German master in the sixteenth century. The name of this brilliant German architect: Jorg von Hallsbauch.

Once I got over the smell of his breath, a strange mix of dusty library and roadkill, I inquired as to whether he knew the history of the church and his namesake. Jorg, as he told me to call him, calmly assured me that it was more than likely that he knew more on both topics than I could ever hope to.

The church was empty that morning, as I recall, except for the two of us, a few guttering candles, lit in prayer, the good Lord, and a large stone statue of our Virgin Mother, looking for all the world as though the pity on her face might break free in a wail of righteous concern for the world.

I was still over an hour away from my scheduled meeting with the Monsignor and began to explore the sanctuary, admiring the skill with which it had been constructed. But each time I stopped moving, or gazed too long in one direction a voice would ring out from the front pew, where Jorg sat, watching me intently.

"That buttress there," he said. "We broke the first one. A rope snapped and the stone crushed two workers when it fell. It cost a fortune to replace it. Even back then, marble wasn't cheap." When I looked up at the balcony, I heard him say, "It was supposed to be all mahogany up there, but when we got around to it, the money was all but gone."

I knew the legends of the place, even then, but I had never heard about there being a different plan for the balcony. Still, I didn't engage him. Only when I reached the small footprint, burned into the floor in the entryway just outside the sanctuary entrance did I decide that I had little choice other than to listen to my halitosis-ridden friend.

"It's true, you know," he said.

"What's true?" I asked, tracing the legendary footprint with my finger.

"That's the Devil's footprint."

"Yes," I said with a dismissive wave. "I've heard the myths."

He laughed. Not a sound of mirth or irony or humor, but of derision. "It never seems to work its way into our brighter minds, does it?" he asked.

“What doesn’t?”

“That myth is nothing more than our old friend truth, who just happens to have occurred when we had no other means of spreading it than passing it down the generations from one ear to the next.”

Now he had my attention. I could not deny that somewhere beneath the mottled skin, ragged clothing and swimming in the cloud of undigested food odor, rested a mind capable of such a thought. I gave the footprint on the floor one last sweep with my hand before standing and making my way back towards him.

“I knew you would come,” he said as I got closer.

“You did?” I asked rather childishly. “How?”

He answered by nodding to the statue of the Blessed Virgin, resting on the dais. I confess, in that moment, my mind snapped back to my initial assessment of this man: bat-crap-insane.

“Sir,” I began, “are you telling me that you speak to that statue?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he asked. “She intercedes on all of our behalves.”

“And she speaks back?” I asked as one asks a child if they know who stole cookies off the counter.

“She understands our plight better than anyone,” he said. “Or are you not a Christian?”

I confessed that I was not, that I was an academic.

“I can see why she brought you here,” he said with a sad smile, before slowly sitting in the front pew directly facing the statue. “Well, will you sit and talk with me or not?” he asked over his shoulder.

“We can talk where we are,” I told him, not wanting to get any closer. “I can hear you fine.”

“I understand, Michael,” he said.

This shook me. “How did you know...”

But he just laughed. “I already told you,” he said. “But you don’t have to sit with me if you don’t want to. I’m sure the senses no longer present me well, but I assure you, I was once handsome in sight, sound and smell.”

The room felt slightly off-kilter. I sat quickly in the nearest pew, one on the opposite side from him and a few behind. As I came to rest, I swear I heard the slight sound of footsteps from behind me, but when I turned, nobody had come through the entrance. Jorg had seen my head turn.

“Did you hear that, too?” he asked. I nodded. “Just a trick of the acoustics in here,” he said with a smile. “Or so I’ve heard.”

I tried to smile back.

“They’ve sent you for one last thorough study of the place before they tear it down, huh?” he asked. I nodded. “Can’t say I didn’t know it was coming,” he sighed. “I won’t pretend it won’t be the hardest thing I’ll have to endure on this Earth.”

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"Saying goodbye," he said. Then, he seemed to come to some decision, and with a curt nod toward the Madonna, he raised up and turned to me. I guess he realized that I was scared because he softly assured me that he only wanted me to know the truth.

"...from the horse's mouth, as it were," he said.

"Okay," I managed to say, stealing a glance at my watch.

"You still have 45 minutes until the Monsignor will arrive," he said. I was confused by how much this man seemed to know about me, but it was dislodged by the sound of another footstep behind me. "Nobody's there," he said, glancing at the entryway over my head, his eyes coming to rest on the floor near the entryway.

"I was so inspired when the work began on my masterpiece," he started with no other warning. "I had apprenticed for years under lazy, lesser minds; watching, waiting, taking mental notes of the architectural aspects I wanted to include in my life's work when someone, anyone would consider me, too, a master. I still remember the day Cardinal Ruebenschlum commissioned me. 'A grand testament to the work of Our Lady in this fair city,' he charged me with."

He suddenly whirled back to the Virgin Mary, arms outstretched. "I swore that day to give all of myself, whatever the cost, to fulfilling that sacred commission." He spun back to me, hands high, as if presenting the room to me. "And I succeeded."

"You certainly did," I answered, unbelieving of anything other than the fact that I shared space with an obvious madman. He just stared at me, seemingly unsure whether to press on with his story, until another footstep seemed to steel his resolve.

"The floor, foundation and the building's skeleton had just been completed when the good Cardinal came to me," he said in a low voice. "I thought he had come to mark the progress. I expected praise for my effort, instead I received the first great shock of my years."

"He told you he could no longer fund the work," I interjected, being well-versed in the history of the building. "So, the histories tell it," I added, seeing the intensity in his eyes.

"Yes," he said. "But here's what they never tell you in the histories: He couldn't fund the project anymore because the Vatican had caught him selling indulgences, you know, those blessed pieces of paper guaranteeing the holder entrance into heaven. Did you hear what I said? He was selling them! And the Pope was going to excommunicate him. And of course, the Vatican would never continue a project started by a disgraced Cardinal."

He was right. None of this information was in any of the histories I had ever read, or in any of the stories I had ever heard. In fact, as I thought about it in that hard pew, none of the information I had come across ever gave a reason why the church in Munich could no longer afford the construction.

"I was thwarted in my charge by human frailty and politics!" he yelled. The church seemed to punctuate his words as the echo of a foot stomp bounced off the walls angrily. "Couldn't they see?" he demanded of me. "I was on a mission too great to be waylaid by anything as petty as human political maneuvering."

He seemed then to soften a bit as he turned back to gaze at the beautiful face of Mary. "I spent that winter in solitude," he all but whispered. "Those were the darkest days of my life. Darker even than those I live now."

"How did the building get finished?" I choked out.

"You seek to test me!" he accused, whirling back to face me with rage in his eyes. "You expect me to parrot the bastardized versions the oral traditions have handed you!"

"No," I stammered. "No, I...I want to know what really happened. I believe you!" I lied.

The windows rattled as another footstep fell behind me, louder, stronger than those before.

"We had an early thaw that spring, warming my soul as it did the earth, and I found myself drawn back to this place," he said. "I found myself, lantern in hand, one evening, prowling the unfinished remains of my life's work. Suddenly, I found myself overcome with rage at the unfairness of it all. I screamed at God that night, challenged him, cursed him in ways for which I can never be forgiven. That, I believe, is what brought the visitor to this place."

"Visitor?" I asked.

"Mmm," he said as the echoes of another step died down. "The Devil himself. Dressed in lordly clothing with a handsome face and soft voice, and of course, with a purse full of gold. He told me that he had come to help me, that any man of such talents should not stray from his life's purpose, regardless of the consequences. He said aloud all of the arguments of my head, but which my heart denied."

He paused here for quite a stretch. "At the end of our conversation," he said, barely above a whisper, "we had reached a bargain."

"What bargain?" I asked over the footsteps in my ear.

"In exchange for my soul he would fund the work," Jorg said. "He only insisted on one alteration to my design. He demanded the church be built without a single window. 'So that God's eye may never see the grandeur of the work he was ready to cast aside.' In my anger, I agreed to his terms."

"What did the Cardinal think when work began again?" I wondered.

"I never got the chance to ask him," Jorg said. "He died of syphilis before the trees began to bud, a broken, Godless soul. The Vatican didn't name another Cardinal for a decade, by the time anyone knew it within the church, my work was done."

"Over time, as work went on, year after year, my anger cooled and that night with the Devil seemed too far removed to be important, too distant in the past, the consequences too far in the future to be of any real concern," he said with a sad smile as he turned back to the statue of his Lady. For a moment all was still, the candles offering the only breathy sound.

"I guess it's obvious," he said, motioning to the walls on either side of the church. "I included the windows." I nodded quietly, looking around at the beauty of the stained-glass panes in the morning sun.

Suddenly, a stomp shook the hall.

“The day came, as I knew it would,” he said without turning to me. “The Devil came back to inspect his work the very night after we had consecrated the church, the night after we had sanctified this building as God’s house. The very night,” he breathed, “they delivered that statue to me.”

“The Virgin Mary?”

He nodded. “I had just positioned her exactly as you see her now when I heard his melodic voice behind me, praising my work.”

“But...” I began, but stopped when he spun back to face me.

“Did you think I wasn’t clever enough to know that I’d have to deal with him?” he demanded.

“No, I...”

“I had covered up all the windows with fabric,” he yelled. “When Satan showed up it was clear that he had been expecting me to follow his instructions. But, being proud, and knowing I had the power of our righteous God on my side, I laughed at him. Can you image that? A mere mortal laughing at the Devil himself. I told him proudly, that he had no claim over me as I pulled the rope to reveal moonlight filtering through the very panes of glass you see around you now.”

Boom, the thunderous noise shook the entire building.

“He flew into a rage,” Jorg yelled above the dying echoes. “Being a house of God, he couldn’t come any further into this blessed sanctuary than the entry vestibule. There he stood, first trying to lure me to him, then spewing terrible threats. For hours this went on, unfaltering, until finally as dawn first peeked, he calmly congratulated me.”

“Congratulated you?” I exclaimed.

“He was toying with me,” Jorg said. “He told me that he wasn’t used to being outsmarted, certainly not by a mere man. But he told me my victory was only temporary. Then he smiled and told me that, as a reward for being so clever, I was to be given the knowledge of how I would die. He told me, with a sickening grin, that a stone, laid in place by my own hand, would one day end my life, and that he would be waiting to collect the soul I owed him.”

“What did you do?” I asked just before the building shook again.

“I turned to the Blessed Virgin and began to pray,” he said. “But this angered the Devil. ‘This house shall always be under my foot!’ he screamed. Then, he stomped that footprint into the floor where he stood, the one you were so interested in.”

Then my new friend went quiet, and I sat there, struck by his story, as he approached the statue, the echoes of a thousand footsteps clouding my ears.

“I knew then,” I barely heard him say. “I knew that as long as I stayed within this blessed sanctuary, that no devil could take me. I knew in that moment that as long as I remained within the house I had built for God that no stone, ever laid by my hand, could ever strike me down.”

I struggled to hear him over the sounds of rushing feet. "They're going to tear this place down," I said, rising to my feet and inching toward him.

"Yes," I heard him say. "And I shall have to pay my debt."

For a minute or a year, I stood there, just watching the old man, there on his knees in front of the Virgin Mother of God, with the echoes of footsteps ricocheting around me. I stood there, struck again by the look of overwhelming pity on that statue's face, and the beginning of belief stirring within me.

The final *BOOM* shook my thoughts as it did the church around me. The windows, so beautiful in the morning sun, came tumbling inward as I shielded my face. When I ventured a glance toward the old man, I was struck with horror, as the statue of Mary, in seeming slow-motion, toppled. By the time I reached him, it was too late. The statue, placed with his own hands, had crushed his skull as he kneeled in prayer.

It seemed to me, as the footsteps faded from my mind, that her look of pity was more pronounced that it had been just moments before.